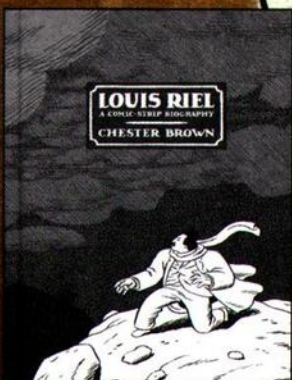
AARDVARK-VANAHEIM/WIN-MILL PRODUCTIONS
FOLLOWING
CEREBUS
#5
$3.95
will EISNER
dave SIM
chester BROWN
Consent
&
Advise
EDITING the GRAPHIC NOVEL
neil GAIMAN
frank MILLER
paul POPE
craig THOMPSON
joe MATT
andy RUNTON
and SETH
Will Eisner
the NAME of the GAME
JAKA'S STORY
DAVE SIM & GERHARD
LOUIS RIEL
A COMIC-STRIP BIOGRAPHY
CHESTER BROWN

Covering the Issue

As noted in this issue's introductory essay, "Advise & Consent: The Editing of Graphic Novels," the interviews that follow were inspired by a panel discussion at last year's Toronto Comicon in which Will Eisner, Dave Sim, and Chester Brown discussed their use—and non-use—of editors in their work. It then seemed a good idea to talk to as many comics creators as we could about the ways in which they do or do not solicit advice about their work before publication—whether that advice comes from editors in an official capacity, or whether the advice may come informally from friends, spouses, and fellow professionals.

As the interviews began piling up, we realized that once again, we were going to be ending up with an issue that extended beyond the intended forty-pager that we had planned. Readers with good memories may recall that this makes us 0-for-5 in the page count department: issues 1 and 2 are 48-pagers; issue 3 is 48 pages along with a fold-out cover; and issues 4 and 5 are 56-pagers. Which is all well and good, except our original cover price was designed with a 40-pager in mind. But by the time we realized the actual page count of each issue, it was way past the time we could change the price without causing all kinds of problems.

But just so everyone knows: *one of these days* (and it might even be next issue), we're going to get everything into 40 pages!

And speaking of next issue: Cerebus returns to *Following Cerebus!* Imagine that! See below for more info.

—Craig Miller/John Thorne

Following Cerebus

Vol. 1 #5 August 2005

***Following Cerebus* produced by**
Craig Miller
&
John Thorne

***Cerebus* comic book by**
Dave Sim
&
Gerhard

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Advise & Consent: The Editing of Graphic Novels by Dave Sim

Pictured above (clockwise from top right): Will Eisner, Peter Birkemoe, and Chester Brown.

The following is an annotated excerpt from the "Graphic Novel Pioneers" panel that featured Will Eisner, myself, and Chester Brown and that was moderated by *The Beguiling* owner Peter Birkemoe. Much appreciation to Blake Bell for providing me with the audiotape, which was recorded at Torontocon in June of 2004, and which I transcribed in February of this year.

Birkemoe: *Something that has come up in just about everything that's been said today is the idea of creative freedom and the choices that all three of you have made, publishing the comic work that you have at the times that you did. You're influenced to some degree by what kind of freedom you're going to have to tell the stories that you want at the time. You've all produced great work, largely independently of any editorial interference. And, in comics, there's not really a great tradition—in recent years, anyway—of a proactive editor beyond someone who phones up and says, "Where are the pages?"* [laughter] *"Where are my pages—time to go to press." That is to say, that there tend to be few editors who are involved on a day-to-day basis with the creator. By contrast, many of the great novels of our day have been profoundly influenced by a strong collaboration between "writer" and "editor." Also, as people who have not only produced their own comics, but have also—all three of you—been in the situation of seeing younger artists coming up, seeing their work, and sometimes being solicited or sometimes just feeling compelled to give constructive criticism along the way, potentially seeing—from the other side—what role you could fulfill as an editor—if you could perhaps—Mr. Eisner first—say a few words on the role that.*
Sim: [referring to Eisner] *He's champing at the bit, here. He can't wait to answer this one. He gets that look on his face:* [through clenched teeth] *"Will you just finish asking the question so I can TELL you."* [laughter]

It was true. From the first mention of editing, Will became very agitated, pawing at the surface of the table and shifting around in his chair like a prizefighter ahead on points who can't wait for the bell to start the next round. In retrospect I think this was a result of his eagerness to indirectly have a conversation that he and I could never comfortably have had directly—this time on a subject of great interest to him and very little interest to me. He had been itching to say to me, in one form or another, "What have you got against editors, anyway?" and had restrained himself from saying so out of diplomacy.

Eisner: [addressing Sim, laughing] *We have to cut off our friendship, because you know me too well, now.*
Birkemoe: *—if you could just talk a bit about "comics and editors," or perhaps the "good and the bad" that can come of this, and what experiences you've had along those lines—*
Eisner: [facetiously, laughing] I'm *GLAD you asked that question.*
Sim: [teasing Eisner] *Seriously. REALLY glad.*
Eisner: *I want to start off by saying* [suddenly very serious]: *creative freedom can result in early starvation.*

I really wish he had elaborated on this point, because it's a great sentence, and it's certainly something I've considered: that a lot of guys who get complete creative freedom at too early an age never develop to the extent that they might because their choices are never challenged—their talent gets "starved" from a lack of clear guidance and channelling. Bernie Wrightson, as an example, would never have produced his best work or have gotten as good as he got as early as he got if it hadn't been for Joe Orlando putting tracing paper over his earliest pages and indicating where he had made fundamental amateur mistakes in composition, narrative flow, positioning of word balloons—all the basics of good comic book storytelling. Their relationship always seemed to me the ideal circumstance in an editor/creator relationship. Joe Orlando was not in Wrightson's league, and I'm sure he knew that, but he also knew many things from his years of experience at the drawing board that only come from years of experience at the drawing board. But, that to me was more like advice from mentor to protégé and less like traditional editing. It was showing Wrightson how to get better results, not dictating to him how you do a good Joe Orlando-edited mystery story.

Eisner: *The function of the editor, in my opinion, and the way I use an editor: Dave Schreiner—who just died recently and who had been my editor for a long time—functioned as a reader's surrogate. He's a guy who could read something of mine and tell me, "Look, this doesn't work." Creative freedom, to me, is when an editor says to me "I don't understand this; this doesn't work." I don't want him to tell me how to fix it. I'll go back and fix it myself—*
Sim: *—or decide if it needs fixing.*

This was a question masquerading as a statement. I was trying to get Eisner to admit that he was still the one in charge. Dave Schreiner wasn't *telling* him what he needed to fix, he was *suggesting* what he *thought* needed to be fixed.

Eisner: *—but I want to know his reasons for why he thinks it doesn't work: "I don't understand it," or "Where does this guy come from?" or "Why does this happen here?" That's all I want him to tell me. There are two reasons to tell a story. One is that you have something to say, and the other is that you want to make some money. Sometimes the two are wedded together. But before you do something, you have to have an idea—two ideas, really: an idea of what you want to say and an idea of who your reader is. As I said earlier, I need an adult reader. I can't write to a fourteen-year-old kid, because I'm not talking about things that he understands or is interested in. So creative freedom is, like—well, with Scott McCloud's Creator Bill of Rights. It's all wrong. A creator has rights to start with. He owns what he did in the very beginning, and if he wants to sell it off, well, okay, go ahead and sell it.*

This really opened a can of worms that, as far as I was concerned, was too large to be dealt with in the last half of a one-hour panel. And, again, I suspect that Will was grateful for the opportunity to take issue with the Creator Bill of Rights without having to do so—undiplomatically—to my face while still allowing us to have a semblance of a dialogue on the subject.

Sim: [attempting to be conciliatory in what I assumed was a roomful of "pro-editors"] *That's a right as well.*
Eisner: *That's a right. That's a freedom. That's a "creator's freedom." That's my definition. You guys can pick it up from there. I had freedom when I was doing* The Spirit*—largely because the syndicate had never seen a comic magazine or a comic book in that form before, so I was the expert* [laughter].
Sim: [laughing] *That's right. They had to come to you to find out what it was.*
Eisner: *That's right. They wouldn't dare tell me what to do or how to do it. The editors there would correct my spelling, which sorely needed help anyway, because I'm a lousy speller.*

I let that go, but it always seems to me to be an evasion on the "pro-editor" side of things. Spelling and grammar corrections fall into the category of proofreading—which can be accomplished *without* and *apart from* traditionally defined editing, which, as I see it, is the dictated changing of content (and often authorial intent) for arbitrary authoritarian reasons. Changing the spelling of a word from an incorrect to a correct usage isn't an arbitrary correction. No one with a lick of common sense would choose incorrect spelling or incorrect grammar if he were made aware of it. Unless of course there were a purpose behind the misuse—to indicate that a character is illiterate, perhaps.

Eisner: *Occasionally they would get a letter saying, "Remember that this is a Sunday newspaper that you're in, and we have a family audience, so please don't do those sexy women," or—*
Sim: *"—don't make them look THAT good."* [laughter]
Eisner: [laughing]
Sim: [laughing] *'Cause you could make those women look—*
Eisner: *Well, I never drew a woman without any clothes on. But they were sexy anyhow. Most of my women held out a promise that they had no intention of delivering on anyway* [laughter and applause].
Sim: *The Will Eisner women looked better with clothes on than most women look naked. I've gotta tell ya.*
Eisner: *You pick it up from there.*

Again, I didn't want to take issue with this, but it seemed to me another evasion. That wasn't editing so much as it was borderline censorship. The subscribing newspapers weren't indicating that they thought the thematic core of the story was being undermined by the women being too sexy, or that it was uncharacteristic of the female lead to dress that way given her background and general tone. They were addressing Eisner as one of the widget-makers who contributed to the totality of their Sunday paper and were indicating that there were boundaries to what they allowed in the way of content in the widgets that they purchased. Tone down the content in your widget, or take the chance that we'll drop you.

Sim: *In my case, I came from a—*[attempting to be diplomatic]*—non-editorial angle on things. I definitely wanted to make my own decisions, and if I fall on my face, I'm going to fall on my face. This sort of ties in with the "pushing the boundaries" thing that we were talking about earlier that—if you're pushing a boundary that hasn't been pushed before—say, putting in what would traditionally be considered too much content—I'll cite the obvious example of the text pieces in* Jaka's Story*, where no one previous to that had used large blocks of text in a comic-book story. I would maintain that there is probably not an editor on the planet who—if I had come to them as the* Cerebus *creator and said, "Here, do you think this works?"—wouldn't have said, "No, I don't think it does work. It just brings the whole thing to a crashing halt, and it doesn't read properly." And I can't say that I disagree entirely, because when Terry Moore—I suspect, influenced by me—put text pieces into* Strangers in Paradise: *the first issue that he did it in, I'm reading along very happily and then hit this brick wall of a text piece and went, "I don't want to read all this! This is a comic book! What is all this text doing in a comic book?" But, I still maintain that it was the right creative decision to make. It makes you read the story differently, but...*

That was about as concise as I could be on the subject in that limited a forum that demanded answers that were not much longer than a television sound byte. What I was saying is that you can make a decision that everyone agrees is the wrong one, and that that decision can still be right. I've never wished that I had done *Jaka's Story* differently and left out the text pieces, but I had no way of knowing while I was working on it if I would or wouldn't someday regret those text pieces.

Sim: *Now, in handing this off to Chester, I have found that Chester has a very interesting situation in that you're one of the few guys that I know who has this documented on paper with the two stories that you did—"Helder" and "Showing Helder"—which was not about using an editor—*

[addressing Will]*—but this was analogous to that situation you were discussing with Dave Schreiner of—*

[addressing Chet]*—you, having finished the story, "Helder"—well, you tell it.*

"Showing Helder" concerned Chet showing the completed "Helder" story to Seth, Mark

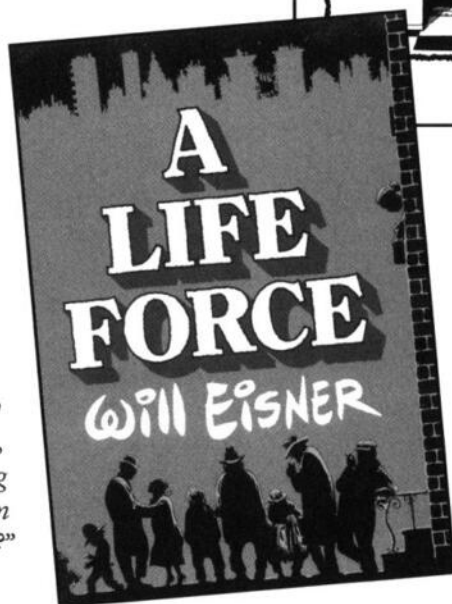
Askwith, and Kris, each of whom had a different opinion on the work. The point I was hoping he would make is that you can get input from three different individuals, all of whom have a different opinion, so you still have to make your own decision.

Brown: *Getting a reader's reaction. Instead of using an editor, what I usually do is to show it to my friends. And, these days, one of my best friends is the cartoonist Seth, who knows the comic book medium very well, and he often gives me good advice that I sometimes take and sometimes don't take, but it seems to work as well as having a professional editor do the work.*

Sim: [trying to make my point] *Just to pick up on that, I would never have done that. My attitude was never to get feedback from people. It had to come all from inside of me. If I was confident that I was doing the right thing, it's only going to throw me off to have someone say, "Gee, I don't think that this works here." And that was one of the interesting things in "Showing Helder," that everybody had a different opinion about the story: this person thought it didn't work, another person thought it was fine—"You're worried about nothing." Kris, your girlfriend at the time who you put in there, her only objection was the ugly clothes you had her in. And she's pulling up the taped-down panels: "You can't put that in there. I look ugly. I would never wear something like that." And you're, like: "No, don't! I'll fix it. I'll fix it!" And then you had another couple of panels of you sitting there going, "What am I worried about? This is the best thing I've ever done." And the next day working on it and going, "Aw, this is really falling apart at the seams. What am I even pretending to do here?"*

I got all the way through my argument without making my point, which was: No matter how many opinions you get, they're still just opinions, and you're still going to have levels of self-doubt about what you're doing. I think that outside opinions just complicate the process by adding *external* doubt to *internal* doubt.

Eisner: *To me, a graphic novel is like writing a letter or telling a story. And if you cannot convey what you're saying and the reader doesn't "get it," then you're wasting your time. People always say, "I write for myself." If you're the only guy who understands that book, you've wasted your time.*

This seemed evasive, to a degree, as well. Just because Dave Schreiner suggested that something didn't work and Will fixed it—or "fixed" it—that

TO NO AVAIL UNTIL one day (a day like most any other day in all *other* respects) when she tried the door handle and found, very much to her astonishment, that it slid downward easily, in a shallow arc. And further that the door, now, swung inward smoothly and silently (so heavy was the Locked Door, in fact, and so warped its frame by a hundred seasons of swelling and an equal number contracting, that it very nearly slid from Jaka's grasp and it was only youthful reflexes which allowed her to arrest its momentum).

Beyond the threshold there were no chests over-flowing; no riches; no gems; no precious metals. Only a musty, abbreviated hallway, its tile edged in mould, its floor a patchwork of gray and yellow where the wax lay in a state of advanced decomposition beneath a translucent layer of dust. Overhead were two skylights, their panes smudged and streaked with the myriad residues of the elements. Here and there, wan tendrils of sunlight ventured cautiously around the grime of those panes; here and there, catching stray and winking dust motes disturbed by Jaka's intrusion.

There was scarcely time to ease the brass handle back into place and release the bolt slowly into the waiting door frame as Jaka heard the sound of Nurse's footsteps coming closer.

Jaka's heart was still pounding many minutes into their walk. She was flushed with excitement, recollection following recollection, her mind in turmoil. The skylights, the dusty floor, the vaulted ceiling.

And the door, part-way open, at hallway's end.

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Above: a text-heavy page from Jaka's Story

didn't necessarily mean that suddenly thousands of people were going to "get" *Life Force* who otherwise wouldn't. There would be no way of testing the hypothesis short of publishing both versions and enclosing a survey. And "the only guy who understands that book" seemed more than a little disingenuous. Also, for many writers, producing a work that is fully appreciated only by a select few is one of the defining characteristics of genuine Art. I was assessing whether there was any way to fully express the idea in sound byte form when Chet jumped in.

Brown: *Well, were there times with Dave Schreiner where he would say, "I don't get this" and you would say, "I don't care. I think it works right, and I'm not going to change anything"?*

Well, I thought, there goes all hope of being conciliatory out the window. However, it was a very good question that cut to the core of the discussion, and it threw Will off, I suspect because the honest answer was "no." If Dave Schreiner said he didn't get something, Will would assume that it was wrong and fix it. But, who was to say that Dave Schreiner was right? What if there were something

in the book that Dave Schreiner didn't get, but everyone else would?

Eisner: *I never—you know, that's interesting, because I never had occasion—I looked at it very carefully to see it from his point of view, and I could see where he wouldn't understand it, so I made it clearer. It's like correcting the punch-line of a joke you're telling. As a matter of fact, my first reader in all of my books in the last few years has been my wife, who never read comics. In fact, the first twenty-five years of our marriage she never read a* Spirit *story. She—I don't think she knew what I was doing all day.* [laughter] *I think she thought I was a bootlegger or something. But there was one book—I think it was* Life Force*—where there was a scene in which this guy has a kind of peasant-like, slovenly wife, and he meets up with an old girlfriend, and he's starting to have an affair with this old girlfriend, and Ann reads the story, and she says to me, "That doesn't work." And I said, "What do you mean, 'That doesn't work?'" And she said, "The wife doesn't know that he's having this affair." And I said, "No, she doesn't know. She's a dumb woman." My wife turned to me, and she says, "She would know."* [laughter] *And I thought, she was an authority on that subject.* [laughter] *It made me watch my conduct after that very carefully* [laughter].

It was an interesting tack to take. I suspect he was brought up short by the inference that he had chosen never to take issue with Dave Schreiner's assessment and was attempting to shore it up by indicating that it wasn't *just* Dave Schreiner who read his work; Ann did as well. And obviously I couldn't say anything in a public forum about Ann's assessment—which I think was less concerned with the needs of the story and more concerned with the possible implications about "wives in general" relative to the story point of adultery. The fact that everyone was laughing, I think, meant that we were all reading the same subtext into Ann's reaction, including Will. My own view is that a wife reading metaphorical implications into the story and reacting to them as metaphorical implications would undermine the validity of the criticism. By his own admission, Will had written the wife as a "dumb woman"—and given that it's safe to say that such women exist: there are women who are "dumb" enough that they don't know that their husbands are having affairs—then that character does, indeed, "work." I tried to stay on the safe side—as I've found through years of bitter experience, there isn't one in these situations—but I couldn't resist a little unfounded metaphorical dig of my own:

Sim: *When we were checking into the hotel yesterday, the desk clerk asked Will, "How many keys do you want to your suite?" And he said, "Two." And Ann—wasn't—with—him. And I went 'TWO!?'"* [laughter] *I guess it was just "force of habit."*
Eisner: [playing along] *It was "just in case."* [laughter]
Sim: [laughing] *"Just in case." So, for any of you ladies in the crowd* [laughter]*—I only got one key for my suite.*
Eisner: *I'm an incredible optimist* [laughter]. *Anyway, no. That's the thing: you cannot attempt to tell a story unless you're pretty sure—just as with writing a letter to somebody—that the reader is going to get it. And your skill—your genius—depends on your ability to tell a story so somebody will understand it.*
Sim: *At what stage in writing the story did you show it to Ann and get her criticism? Was this still in the rough form? Or...?*
Eisner: *I work in two stages. I do what I call a "dummy," a pencil version of it. I write with pictures and text at the same time. Sometimes I do the images first. What I do is I show the "dummy" to her only at the point when it's totally complete. I generally don't like to discuss a book while I'm in the process of working. It's a little bit like sex. You don't want to be taking about it while you're doing it, you know?* [laughter]
Sim: *I've found that, as well.*
Eisner: [laughing and teasing me back] *"I remember that."*
Sim: *So you didn't change it. It was done, right?*
Eisner: *It was done, and then I changed it. I erased that sequence, and I changed it, so that the wife in the story would know about the affair. I had her reacting to it. So, no. There I changed it. As a matter of fact, at that point, I do a lot of changes. That was also the stage at which I would show the book to Dave Schreiner. He would come back and mark it up—"Where does this guy go?" or "What happened here?" You know, "Two pages ago, you had this guy about to jump off a roof, and three pages later he hasn't jumped off the roof. Where is it?"*
Sim: *Right, right.*

In a roomful of feminists, I couldn't see any recourse but to back off, but I still thought that the criticism was invalid. Worse than that, I thought he had capitulated on a fundamental point by changing the story so that the wife in the story knew about the affair. He was discounting his own—to me, *more* valid—opinion that there exist wives who are so "dumb" that they don't know their husbands are having an affair. He had changed the nature of the character as he had intended that character on the basis of what—again, to me—was a *less* valid opinion: that a wife will always know her husband is having an affair no matter how dumb she is. I can understand a wife, and women in general, wanting that to be true, but I don't think the evidence supports that view.

Anyway, I found this portion of the tape interesting enough that I became curious—as the extremist on the subject, the one guy who had no interest in being edited or soliciting outside advice—as to what other graphic novelists were doing, and I decided it might make an interesting feature. I called Chet to see if he were willing to talk "on the record" about the people who have advised him on his various graphic novels, what advice he accepted, and what advice he had rejected.

Josie in Ed the Happy Clown

should be completely his own creative self-expression. If he takes into account other people's responses, then it feels to him that it's left the control he has over that self-expression. So he doesn't like getting feedback.

Sim: *How about that? Seth and I are on the same page about something.*

Brown: *[laughs]*

Sim: *That doesn't happen very often.*

Brown: *[refusing to be drawn out]* Uh-huh. *[laughs]*

Sim: *Do you ever feel that you're doing a disservice to the material by getting reactions from people?*

Brown: No, because I think that sometimes getting a reaction does—there are things you miss otherwise. I know I wanted to avoid discussing *Ed the Happy Clown,* but I'll bring up an *Ed the Happy Clown* example.

Sim: [laughs]

Brown: In the sequence in *Ed the Happy Clown* where it's revealed that Josie is a vampire, I knew that she was going to be a vampire all along, but I had forgotten that the audience didn't know that, so it came up out of the blue, and the reason *why* she was a vampire wasn't really clear, and that became obvious to me only when I showed the issue to Bill. I realized as I was reading the pages over his shoulder—well, he made a comment anyways, and in that sequence as it reads now there's a flashback, showing *why* Josie's a vampire. And that I had to add, and that was just a mistake on my part that needed to be corrected. I needed another pair of eyes looking at it to point out that mistake.

"I think everyone was *afraid* to make suggestions on *Underwater*....They hadn't a clue what I was up to."

Sim: *At this point I'll just encourage all of the* Following Cerebus *readers to go out and buy the new serialized* Ed the Happy Clown *with your new annotations in the back and we won't talk about* Ed *anymore.*

Brown: *[laughs]* Okay.

Sim: *Are there any other reactions that you remember getting to* The Playboy *that caused you to change the material in the same way?*

Brown: Mmmm *[long pause],* no. I'm actually flipping through the book right now. Looking to see if there's—no I don't remember *[finds something].* Well, there is. In the Epilogue. I have myself walking along with Mark Askwith talking about *Playboy*—actually talking about *Playboy* magazine—

Sim: *That's right; I remember that part.*

Brown: —and obviously the conversation is taking place, because I'd showed one of the issues to him—the first instalment that was published in *Yummy Fur.* And I thought that his reaction was interesting enough to include in an epilogue. So obviously that had an effect on the work. Because it's actually in the work, it's hard to forget that reaction, but any of the other ones I can't remember.

Sim: *Not getting into any specifics, but there were a number of instances of that attached to* Ed the Happy Clown.

Brown: Sequences where stuff was changed?

Sim: *Yeah, because of the reactions.*

Brown: There are a few, anyways.

Sim: *Do you think maybe it was just a matter that you were maturing as a creator and not making mistakes that you had to go back and flesh out or correct?*

Brown: Hmm. *[long pause] Maybe.* Maybe. I know that in *I Never Liked You* there was a final panel that the story originally ended on and that panel—when I was showing it around to Seth and Mark Askwith and whoever else was around at that point—I think Joe [Matt] had moved to Toronto around that time so I was starting to show the work to Joe, too—everyone *hated* that last panel.

Sim: [laughs] *Is that right? You had a real consensus on that.*

Brown: *[laughs]* There was a real consensus, so that last panel was eliminated.

Sim: *Okay.* [long pause] *Did you like the last panel?*

Brown: Uhhhhhhhh—

Sim: *Not after you showed it to everybody.*

Brown: Yeah, after everyone seemed to dislike it, I figured it probably was a mistake.

Sim: *That's interesting. So you showed your work to Kris when you were with her, and you showed your work to Sook-Yin when you were with her. How would you compare the*

input that you got in those two instances?

Brown: I should mention that I can't remember ever showing stuff to people when it was in just the pencil stage. I always have people read it when the inks are done and I'm trying really just to catch last-minute mistakes, that sort of thing. I'm not looking for a reaction that will completely change the story. Everyone does see it around the same time. As to the difference between Kris and Sook-Yin *[long pause]*, there was at least one big suggestion that I can remember on *Ed the Happy Clown* that I remember Kris making. I'm not sure that I can remember changes that were as large with Sook-Yin. Of course my memory on all this stuff is kind of vague.

Sim: *Are there any later examples that jump out in your mind on* Underwater *as an example?*

Brown: I think everyone was *afraid* to make suggestions on *Underwater.* It was a work that just kind of confused everyone, I think. People were hesitant to suggest alternative directions or to say something wasn't working in certain instances. *[laughs]* They hadn't a clue what I was up to.

Sim: *Did you pick up on that? Did you have a sense that you were getting a different kind of feedback, maybe more polite or not as—*

Brown: Yeah, that's how it seemed. "More polite." People didn't know *what* to say about it.

Sim: *They didn't want to hurt your feelings.*

Brown: Maybe. Uhh—I'm not sure about that one.

Sim: *Okay. I was just curious if the decision was made to put* Underwater *on hold because the non-reaction was sinking in or if that was your own reaction to what was going on with the book.*

Brown: It was more my own reaction. If the book had been as clearly scripted as it was for [*Louis*] *Riel* and I had been confident in the material, I don't think other people's reactions would have had that much of an effect on me. It was my own lack of confidence in the material. No one was saying that they hated it in my own circle, and the only negative feedback I can remember is that one *Comics Journal* issue where they changed the "Hit List" to the "Shit List," and we were both on that list, if I remember.

Sim: [laughing] Cerebus *was on there, too?*

Brown: *[laughing]* *Cerebus* was on there and *Underwater* was on there.

Sim: *There you go. That was a high water mark in both of our careers.* Underwater *was the only one where you didn't have everything mapped out ahead of time?*

Brown: No, no. *Ed the Happy Clown* was made up as it went along, too. It's not that I didn't know where I wanted to go with *Underwater*, it was more the pacing that was the problem. How *long* it was taking to get where I wanted to go, and if I had it all scripted out, I could have seen that the pacing was going to be a problem and that I needed to tell the story much more quickly in getting from point A to point B.

Sim: *Was that the case with* Ed *and* Underwater *that those were the two where you let them take their own shape with an overall plan in mind and the others were all—*

Brown: *Ed* was much *less* of an overall plan. *Ed* was closer to making stuff up issue by issue.

Sim: *Except for things like, you knew Josie was a vampire—*

Brown: Right. There were specific things. With *Ed* I tended to make overall plans and then change them when it came time to draw an issue. Certain things would stick—like having Josie become a vampire—and then other things would change as each issue was drawn.

Sim: *Right. So that brings us up to* Riel, *which would be the freshest one in your memory at this point. What was the "Advise & Consent" consultation process on that? Do you remember giving people an advance look where a substantial change took place?*

Brown: I remember a few. The one that comes to mind immediately was in the trial scene at the end of the book. I'm flipping to it now. Okay—in the book it's pages 229 and 230. On the bottom of page 229 the Judge is giving his charge to the jury, and then on page 230 there are two black panels, and then we cut to Riel praying while he's waiting for the jury to come back in, and then the jury comes back in. Originally, I went straight from the Judge's last instruction to the jury to the panel of Riel praying. And Seth said that he thought there needed to be a bit more of a gap to convey the impression of the jury needing some amount of time to reach their decision—that it just seemed too sudden the way I had it, going straight from the Judge to the jury coming in. That made sense to me, and I didn't know quite how to handle it, and that was when I came up with the two all-black panels. In the issue it's actually more than two panels—maybe four?—and then in the book I shortened it to two.

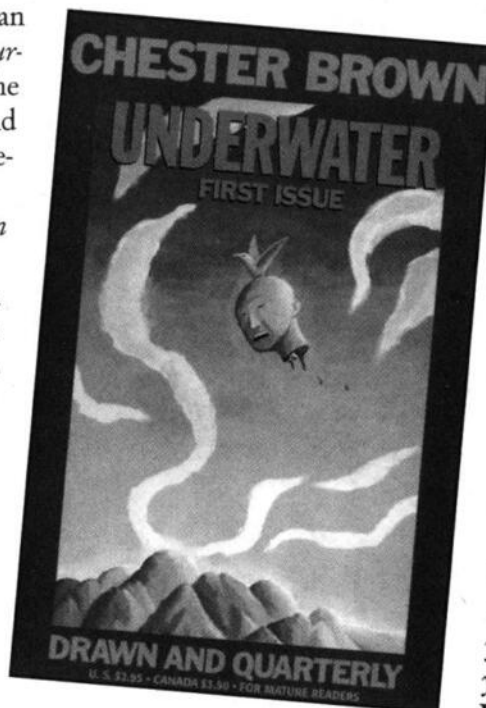
Sim: *That's one of those things. "What is the right number of black panels—"*

Brown: *[laughs]*

Sim: *"—to get that effect across?" Did you have any part of you that wanted to go the other way and say, "Maybe it should be six"?*

Brown: Uhhh, for the book?

Sim: *Yeah. For the book, obviously, you'd have some extra room in there if you wanted extra room.*

Brown: *[long pause]* Yeah, I can't

Chester Brown Interview

Chester Brown's acclaimed work includes Yummy Fur, Ed the Happy Clown, The Playboy, I Never Liked You, Louis Riel, *and* Underwater. *Dave Sim interviewed Brown on February 25. Dave did the transcription; Dave, Chester, and Craig Miller edited the text.*

Sim: *Okay, let's not compete against your* Ed the Happy Clown *annotations on the new reprinting. So the next graphic novel after* Ed *was—*

Brown: In terms of so-called graphic novels, I guess *The Playboy.*

Sim: *Do you remember—?*

Brown: But, then, if we were talking "just comics," it would've been the earlier autobiographical stuff like "Helder" and "Showing Helder."

Sim: *When I was talking to Craig Thompson, he has four or five friends that have always been the ones that he's consulted with on the three graphic novels that he's done so far. Was "Showing Helder" a period when you were consulting more with people, or have you always pretty much done that?*

Brown: I've always done it. I guess I've always been interested in getting feedback and was always interested in showing it to whoever might be around who would be interested in looking at whatever I had been working on at that point. I would've still been with Vortex [Publishing] at the time. But I don't show myself in "Showing Helder" showing the "Helder" story to Bill Marks [the Vortex Publisher]. Which, I was doing at that point certainly all the way through *Ed the Happy Clown,* every *Ed* sequence I had shown to Bill, and I'm pretty sure I must've done the same thing with "Showing Helder." I might've just decided that his reaction wasn't interesting enough to include in the story, but I'm pretty sure I must've shown it to Bill.

Sim: *Let's skip on to* The Playboy, *then. Who were the people that you would've been showing that material to? Is it vivid in your memory?*

Brown: Not vivid in my memory at all. The only person I remember showing at least *part* of *The Playboy* to—do you remember Reg Hart that we ran into on the street?

Sim: *Yeah.*

Brown: The guy who shows esoteric and vintage films and cartoons in Toronto?

Sim: *Yeah, very interesting character.*

Brown: *[laughs]* I happened to be visiting his place around the time that I was finishing the first issue of *The Playboy*—the first installment that appeared in *Yummy Fur*—although I don't remember what his reaction was or how it would've affected me, or if it did affect me.

Sim: *Who else do you remember showing parts of* The Playboy *to?*

Brown: *[stumped]* Well, in "Showing Helder" I have myself showing "Helder" to Seth, and he comments in there that it's the first time that I've shown him something in advance. So, I think we started getting into that habit after that, where I was showing him my stuff. So I'm pretty sure I showed Seth *The Playboy,* too. And I'm pretty sure I would've shown it to Kris, too.

Sim: *What about Mark Askwith, because that was someone you depicted yourself as showing "Helder" to?*

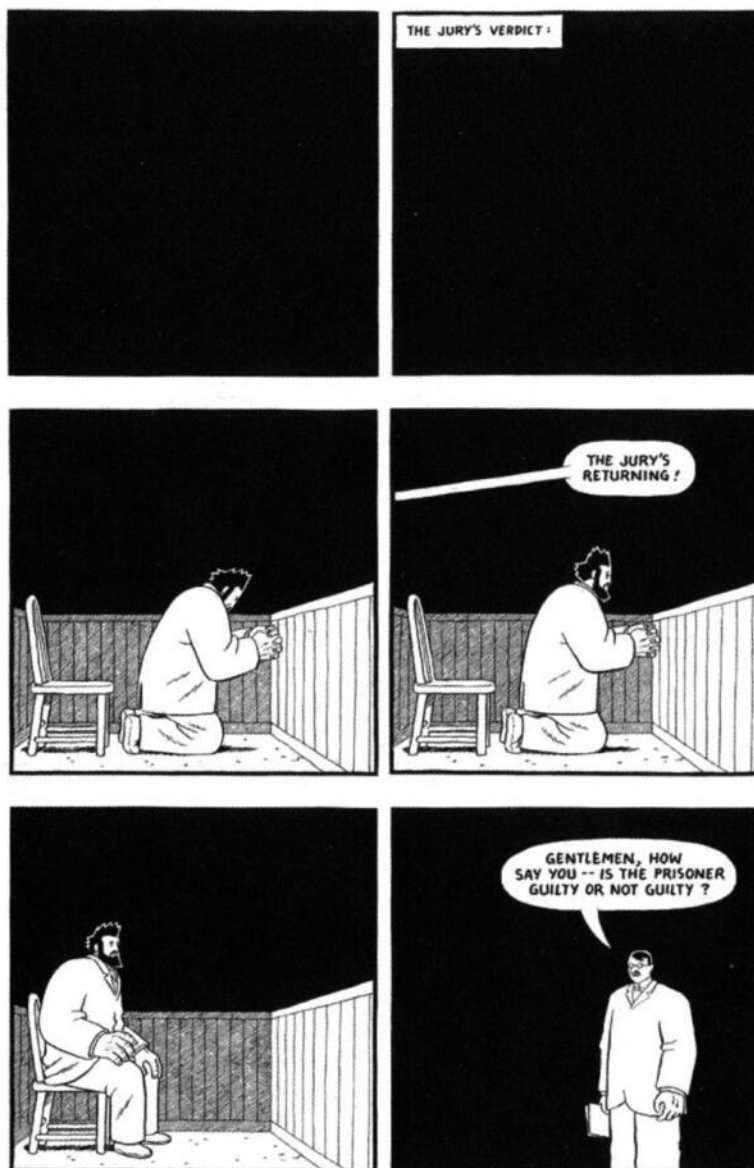
Brown: *[still stumped]* Yeah?

Sim: *Was he a "regular" on the list?*

Brown: He was a regular on the list. During the time that I was at Vortex, I'm pretty sure that I showed every issue to Bill, and so he was a regular. Mark Askwith was a regular, Kris was a regular, and I think around this time Seth became a regular. I think that was about it for the list of people who got showed stuff for just about every issue.

Sim: *Is it reciprocal with Seth? Does he show you his stuff?*

Brown: No. He *has.* Usually if I see an issue in advance, it's because he wants it proofread, and not because he's interested in feedback. Seth has told me that he hates feedback. He feels that the issue

remember. I don't think there was any temptation to go longer on that. I figured that two was enough.
Sim: *And four was too much.*
Brown: It wasn't that four was too much. The reason for shortening it to two had been—*[digging around in his memory]* in the original issues, the story had been divided into four parts with the fourth part being the trial scene and execution. Originally, part four didn't start at the top of a page, it started in the middle of a page, so then in the book I started it at the beginning of a page, which meant that two panels needed either to be added or eliminated to make sure that it started at the beginning of a page. And the obvious place to shorten the story was with the four black panels, and I went for shortening it instead of lengthening it.
Sim: *And all you can do is to read through it and read through it and read through it and bring fresh eyes to it each time out, asking yourself, "Is this the reading experience effect I want to create?"*
Brown: *[doubtful]* I suppose. I remember some other suggestions Seth made. Thomas Scott. He did not like how I drew Thomas Scott's face.
Sim: *Really?*
Brown: Yeah, it's kind of an odd, long face, larger than those of all the other characters around him. I think he thought that it didn't mesh well with the way I had drawn the other people in the book.
Sim: *It was a jarring visual note for him.*
Brown: Yeah. And I *wanted* Scott to stand out, and that's why I drew him in such a distinctive way. Seth thought it was *too* distinctive. But I didn't follow that advice—I chose to ignore that particular piece of advice. There was something else that he recommended that I chose to ignore [long pause]. No, it's gone out of my mind. I should've written these down beforehand.
Sim: [laughs]
Brown: Seth was definitely the one who had the most suggestions on *Riel.* Joe would've been looking at it. For some reason I had stopped showing stuff to Kris. I don't remember showing any of the later issues to Kris. I was still showing stuff to Sook-Yin. I don't remember any specific suggestions from Sook-Yin.
Sim: *All of the people that you consult with—and it really is more of a consultation than just getting them to read it—they're always aware that you want them to be as completely honest with you as they can. "Read it and tell me if you think something is wrong or if you think something is out of place." You want them to mention it.*
Brown: Yeah. After I had that experience with Bill where he pointed out that the audience doesn't know that Josie is a vampire, after that I became very concerned about that sort of thing. I say to my friends, "Anything like that—anything that's unclear: a scene-to-scene transition that doesn't seem to work, anything like that, let me know."
Sim: *And most of the time, the reaction is—it sounds like—"No, it's just fine."*
Brown: Yeah. *Most* of the time.
Sim: *Most of the time. And Seth's the one who's got a problem with everything.* [Chet laughs] *I'm just kidding.*
Brown: It does mean that Seth is—certainly with the *Riel* book, I remember him having more suggestions that the other people I was showing the book to.
Sim: *Right. Does Seth want feedback on his own work when the printed version comes out? When he shows you a new issue, does he want to know what you think of it?*
Brown: Ummmm *[pause]*, I don't think so.
Sim: *No? Do you react anyway?*
Brown: I've let him know when I haven't liked a sequence.
Sim: [the provocateur] *And he tells you to mind your own business.*
Brown: No. You probably haven't read the book version of *Clyde Fans.*
Sim: *The new one that just came out? No, I haven't read it yet.*
Brown: He did make a change in a specific sequence that reflected some criticisms that

Two black panels in Louis Riel

I had made. Although when I said to him, "I don't think this scene works," he said "Yeah, I know." So, from his point of view, I think he would see it as he was just making a change that he was going to make anyway. It probably *helped* that I criticized it to motivate him to make the change. Whether he would've done that if I hadn't said anything, I don't know.

Sim: *I guess the last question I've got—because I haven't been able to remember it—what was that line in one of the stories that Seth thought was really good? I think it was in* I Never Liked You*—have you got the book handy?*

Brown: I've got the book right here.

Sim: *It was really early in the book, page five or something—*

Brown: *[laughs]* You remembered the page number exactly, it was page five.

Sim: *Really? All right! Brownie points for Dave.*

Brown: Now I have to find the same sequence in *Yummy Fur*. It was—you haven't read those issues of *Yummy Fur*, right?

Sim: *Actually I just completed my collection of* Yummy Fur, *I think. Or I might still be missing two or three. It wouldn't surprise me that that was one of the issues I was missing.*

Brown: Originally, at the beginning of *I Never Liked You*, in its *Yummy Fur* form, the nine-year-old Chester Brown is looking directly out at the reader, and he's explaining "At this age I'm in the habit of taking real words and changing them into nonsense words—" which explains why I'm saying "shit" a number of panels later. I thought it was a nonsense word. I didn't know it was a word that I wasn't supposed to say in front of my mother *[Sim laughs]*, and then she gets mad at me. In the book version I take out that explanation. I just say "shit," and the reader doesn't know specifically *why* I said "shit." I took all that stuff out, and Seth thought that was a mistake. He said it works better if the audience knows why I'm saying that. And I ignored his advice.

Sim: *Do you still think you were right on that one?*

Brown: Mmm. Yeah. I don't think the explanation is necessary. The audience doesn't need to know why I'm saying "shit." I say all kinds of stuff. It's my mother's reaction that's important. It isn't important why I'm saying the word "shit."

[Actually, I did have the issue of Yummy Fur, *number 26, where the story was originally titled "Fuck," which obviously needed to be changed for the collection. The panel I had been inquiring about appears on page 4 in the original—and page 5 in the collection—showing Chet and his friend Connie walking away. Connie has just said, "My mother says that only crude and ignorant people use words like that." The caption in the ensuing panel reads, "I decide that it's better to say nothing," which Seth had been most enthusiastic about, claiming it was one of the best lines Chet had ever written. Which made it all the more unusual that Chet took it out in the collected version, changing it to a completely silent panel.*

After I had turned off the tape recorder, Chet remembered a Seth story that came out of the consultation process, so I turned the tape recorder back on.]

Brown: Have you seen Seth's slide show that he

"I say to my friends, "Anything... that doesn't seem to work,... let me know."

does? Where he talks about various cartoonists, anecdotes about various cartoonists? Some of them are just historical anecdotes, and some of them are anecdotes about cartoonists that he's known, and there is an anecdote about me. And it concerns the story "Danny's Story," where I have the encounter with the black lodger in my lodging house where I'm living. But before the encounter, I get up in the

morning and—I—
Sim: [laughing] *I remember. You're eating your own snot.*
Brown: *[laughing]* Right. Seth did *not* like the whole snot-eating scene. He thought it wasn't necessary and—I don't remember this anecdote at all—but this is the story that he tells in his slide show. I *believe* him but—anyway, according to him, he criticized the snot-eating scene and said I should leave it out. And I said, "It's part of my typical morning, why wouldn't I leave it in?" "Well," he said, "you don't show yourself doing *everything* that you would do in the morning. You don't show yourself taking a *piss*." And according to Seth, at that point I didn't say anything. So apparently, as the anecdote goes, I must've got home and thought, "Yeah, he's right. I *don't* show myself taking a piss. If I'm showing myself eating snot—"
Sim: [laughing] *"—I should show myself taking a piss, too!"*
Brown: So, as the story goes, when the issue came out, there I was in the story taking a piss and eating my own snot.
Sim: [laughing] *Which could be the origin of Seth deciding that you're just this perverse, contrary individual. Could be where it started.*

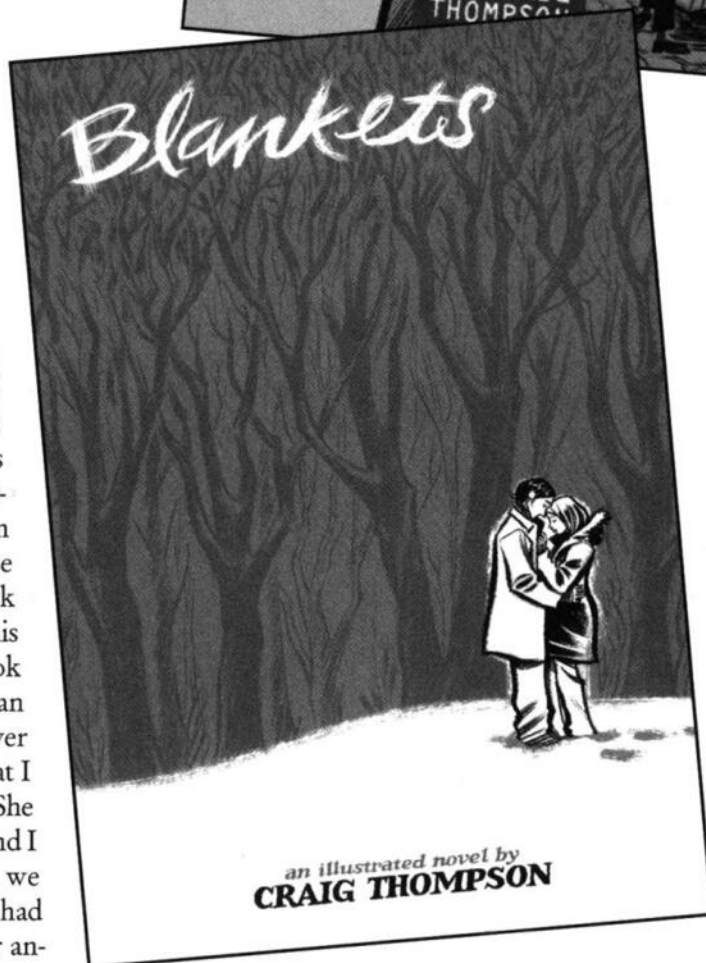
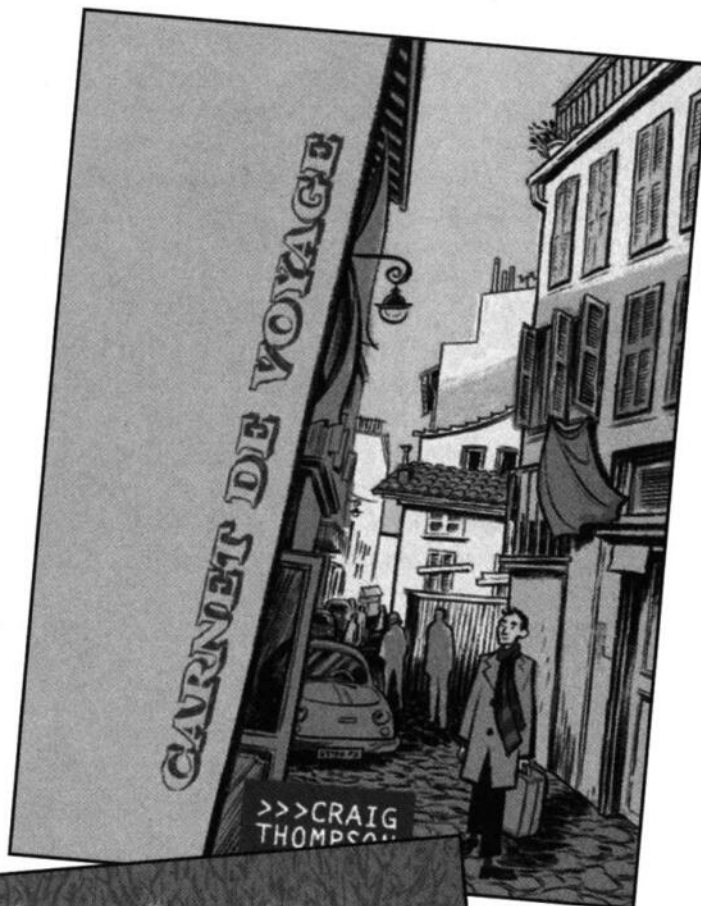
[And Chet wasn't done yet. We had been talking off the record for only a few minutes when he started telling me another pertinent story so I turned the tape recorder back on.]

Brown: Yeah, I was just telling you that there was an issue of *Peep Show* that Joe showed Seth and I in advance. Seth and I were totally brutal. We tore the issue apart and made so many critical suggestions that Joe did virtually rewrite and redraw the entire thing. I'm not sure that there's anything left of the issue he first showed us that made it into print. He must've changed at least half of it, if not more. And that would've been the second or third issue of *Peep Show.*
Sim: *Do you feel bad about that in retrospect? I mean it's all he can do to get an issue out at the best of times.*
Brown: *[laughs]* Well, he was a bit quicker in those days.
Sim: *Well that wouldn't be difficult to be quicker than he is now*
Brown: *[laughs]* No, I think our criticism was justified, and I think we improved the issue. I think it was the right thing to do to make the changes that he did as the result of our criticisms.
Sim: *Were you nice to him the second time around? When he brought back the revised version.*
Brown: Hmmm. *[stumped]* Well, it was improved. So, I don't think it was a matter of 'being nice." It was a matter of—
Sim: *"This is better."*
Brown: Yeah.

Andy Runton interview continued from page 37
So hopefully I'm getting better at this [laughs].
Sim: *Are you getting more input on the third one than you did on the second one?*
Runton: Well, the third one was actually the one that I did for Free Comic Book Day, and there seems to be a pattern shaping up where I'll describe the story to Chris and Rob, and they'll say, "Great, fine—go ahead and do it." And then when I'm at the stage of actually putting it on paper—because I'm not using words—I'll encounter problems with the iconography, and it won't be as clear as it needs to be what the picture in the word balloon means. So that's mostly what they'll ask about, and then I have to go back and rethink the picture and try and come up with an image that expresses the idea I'm trying to get across more clearly. But, I think it's good, because it makes for a clearer comic book that's easier to understand.
Sim: *What about Mom? How much input is she having these days?*
Runton: Mom has one hundred percent input. She's the first one to see it, even before I show it to Chris. It's the best thing. I just do little thumbnail sketches of the panels, and it just kind of flows out. I don't have any idea how long it's going to be, and all of these things I haven't thought of beforehand just start appearing. I'll just write "Owly going to the store," and suddenly I have fifteen pages of Owly going to the store. I'll just do a jumble of panels on the page and then show it to my Mom and say, 'This happens and then this happens." And she'll ask, "Well, why does this happen here—?"
Sim: *And that leads off in different directions.*
Runton: Exactly. And it's all very rough, so it doesn't break my heart if I have to lose a panel or rework a panel. And those are the roughs I show to Chris and Rob as well. They're like really bad handwriting, but I guess they can read them by now.
Sim: *Does Mom get a cut of the royalties?*
Runton: *[laughs]* I suppose she does. Not officially, but absolutely.

Craig Thompson Interview

Craig Thompson is the creator of Blankets, *which took the comics world by storm in winning Eisner, Harvey, and Ignatz Awards last year. Other works include* Goodbye, Chunky Rice *and* Carnet de Voyage, *plus the upcoming* Habibi. *Dave Sim interviewed Thompson by phone on February 22. Dave did the transcription; Dave, Craig Thompson, and Craig Miller edited the text.*

Thompson: I've certainly relied on my friends for editing all three of my books. In terms of editorial feedback I have both the benefit and the drawback of Top Shelf being a scrupulously "hands-off" publisher. Oh, I take that back. With *me* they're very hands off, editorially, but that varies from cartoonist to cartoonist. But, in any case, I've relied on my friends' advice with my books, especially the writing. What happens with the writing at the initial, first-draft stage is easiest to recall with *Carnet de Voyage*, my travelogue book, which went to press while I was still in Europe, and so there was no strain at all in terms of proofreading or editorial input. Top Shelf went straight to the printer with it when I sent it to them from Europe. I have a friend in Lyon—Frédéric—who looked over the entirety of it. There was a specific scene which I edited out, actually near the end of the book, and we discussed it for a while. It was definitely an instance of taming down real life and picking and choosing what I wanted to disclose of my real life. I was really happy to have him there, helping me with that decision at that time because there are certain details about my life—well, I guess anyone who does autobiographical comics already gets a certain amount of flack in the media, with critics judging the creator based on the character that represents them. But I am glad *Carnet* includes some of those sorts of scenes. I was calling back home to my ex-girlfriend while on this trip, and there was a scene in the book that included my romantic European "fling" that I had had while I was over there. And she was really upset that I was going to show that in the book. She thought it was a big insult to her, and I struggled with this—even though we were broken up and it was *she* who had left *me* and had, in fact, left me for another guy. You know, I didn't want to step on any toes, and I certainly didn't want to insult her, or to create all this bad energy by including my fling in the book. Fortunately, there was another friend of mine who said: "No, that's exactly the reason you *have* to publish the book 'as is'—you can't always be ruled by this person."

Sim: *That did become an either/or situation, where you had to take either your ex-girlfriend's recommendation or*

the other person's.

Thompson: Yeah, exactly. In most of these instances—well, there are exceptions—but most of the time I'm looking for my friend/editor to tell me what I want to hear. *[Sim laughs]* I'll show them something, feeling like something is not right—and often even knowing what it is that isn't right—but wanting someone else to pick up on it on their own and to point it out to me and reinforce my suspicion. And I think most often that's the case: where I'm soliciting other people's opinions just to get them to repeat to me what I'm already feeling myself.

Sim: *Chris [Staros, Top Shelf publisher] said on the phone that as the* Blankets *pages were coming in, he realized it didn't need any fixing, so he and Rob were just letting it go to press exactly as you turned it in: "This is coming out exactly just the way that it should." I guess there is also the question of it being easier to make changes in the earlier stages. Submitting a script for a graphic novel is very different from showing somebody your finished 150 pages or 200 pages of fully inked and lettered work.*

Would you agree with that?

Thompson: Exactly.

Sim: *So at what stage are we talking about these revisions taking place with* Carnet de Voyage?

Thompson: Well, as I say, *Carnet* was an exception, because the whole book was written and drawn in two-and-half months *while* I was travelling, and so basically the revisions on the final book were purely a matter of editing out certain sequences or pages. But nothing needed to be redrawn. It was just a question of, "Is this scene in or out?" The finished version is just "as is."

It was quite different with *Blankets*. I spent a whole year just doing the rough version of the book, and I discarded at least a hundred pages of that first rough version, and then I redrew another hundred or so in rough form. It was the last chapter that I had the most problems with. I had a "working" last chapter that I completely discarded. I do remember my girlfriend at the time saying, "Don't make the last chapter too Christian; don't make it about Christianity," and in fact that's kind of what I ended up focusing the most on in the last chapter.

"I discarded at least a hundred pages of that first rough version [of *Blankets*]. It was the last chapter that I had the most problems with."

Sim: *Do the hundred pages still exist?*

Thompson: In the rough form? Yes, I still have the roughs of them.

Sim: *The problem that I always foresaw in thinking about doing something like that was, "What if you guessed wrong and printed the wrong hundred pages?" What if it turns out that the original hundred pages were much better? And what do you do? Do you destroy the original hundred pages or trust to posterity to decide you made the right choice? Presumably if the original hundred pages exist and you're not going to destroy them, at some point up ahead somebody is going say: "Okay, what we have here is* Blankets I *and* Blankets II."

Thompson: No, I think the original roughs got what they deserved—they're not very good! I don't think that second-guessing of that sort will ever be an issue with *Blankets*. With the new book I'm working on, I got about four hundred pages roughed out, and then I hit a pretty significant writer's block. I didn't know what was wrong. I was *hoping* that I was getting near the ending but, in fact, it felt as if I was just starting to *hint* at what the story might actually be about. So, yes, I showed it to friends, and the advice I got was a very vague kind of—. One friend—and this was very helpful—he described the way I was feeling. He said, "You seem to be teetering on the edge of the darkness, but you still haven't taken the plunge. And you've kind of acknowledged that it's there— 'There it is'—but you haven't actually dived into it yet." And he was right. That's how I was feeling.

Sim: *Is it the same friends that you've showed the different works to?*

Thompson: It is. I have a core group of three friends—or maybe as many as five—and I tend to get different reactions out of each of them. There is one friend, as an example, that I will not show my work to when it's in its earliest forms, because she's *so* hypercritical. Right from the first sentence, she'll start pulling the grammar apart. And I'll say to her, "No, no, no I just want you to react to it *emotionally* first." She's really great in the last stages, because she can catch all of my spelling mistakes.

Sim: *"Bring that level of perfectionism to bear where I need that level of perfectionism."*

I have to say, I just can't relate to the idea: "It will be really helpful if I show these hundred pages to person X because—." I wouldn't know how to fill in the blank. What about the other friends? What distinguishes them as—

Thompson: For me their input is useful because, on some level, I have no idea at the end of the working day if what I'm doing makes any sense. To me, the isolation of making comics is comparable to going into a little—into a sort of daze, you know, a trance state that's very weird to come out of.

So at the end of the day I'm really left with all these—scribblings, a lot of the time, sitting there asking myself, "My God, does any of this make any sense to anyone other than myself? Or are they just, like, the ramblings of some stoned guy in a coffee shop or something?" *[Sim laughs]* In that situation, I just feel as if I need a sounding board—someone to justify my existence, I don't know.

Sim: *In my case I was taking so many chances as it was—things like putting big blocks of text in* Jaka's Story—

Thompson: Yeah.

Sim: *—that I knew if I showed it to anybody, they would say "This doesn't work." My instinct was always, okay, I'm really pushing the envelope here, so if anybody says "boo,"*

Above: original roughs for a sequence in Blankets. *Below: the published version.*

I'm apt to back off, and I don't think I want to back off, I think I'd rather do this and fall on my face in public rather than pass up the chance to do something innovative. Do you ever worry that your friends are talking you out of really good ideas?

Thompson: I can't think of a specific example right now. With my story I'm working on now, *Habibi*, as I said I hit this huge creative block, and then I realized that what I needed was a new *structure* for the whole book. I realized that I was telling the story that I wanted to tell, and I still wanted to tell that story, I just didn't want to tell it in a linear narrative. So, having realized that, I'm now able to use all of the existing material I've come up with so far. I just recognized that I didn't want the story told in a linear "A to B to C" sequence. So I'm breaking down the story in a far more abstract and completely non-linear way. And, I have to say, when I was first *starting* to formulate this new and more abstract scheme, I didn't want to discuss it with *anyone*. I just didn't want to have to *explain* the new approach at that point—partly because I didn't *entirely* understand it myself right away but also, I was going, "No, no, no. I can't *bother* right now with trying to explain this." [laughs] "If I can pull it off, it will make sense." That was what I was going on, and I didn't want anyone distracting me from that.

Sim: *So you got about 400 pages roughed in and then thought that you hit a writer's block and then sort of decided—and this was on your own, this is without consulting with anybody—that it was more of a structural problem?*

Thompson: I had the advantage, actually, that I was traveling again—just a couple weeks ago—to Angouleme, you know, for the Festival and then for a little tour of France, and so I had the situation of having a "catalytic space" in my life which allowed

me time to come to some realizations. One of the realizations I came to was about taking a completely different approach to the structural problems of the book, and the other realization was more about the real emotional, personal core, and I think that came out of—I was traveling with a friend, and every night at about four in the morning we'd both be wide

"[O]n some level, I have no idea at the end of the working day if what I'm doing makes any sense."

awake because of jet lag. So we had a lot of those great sorts of conversations you only have at four in the morning—

Sim: [laughs] *—when you're so jet-lagged that you can't really do anything else under the circumstances.*

Thompson: Exactly *[laughs].* Anyway, it was one of those conversations that led to the other realization, which is much more personal, and it was kind of a wake-up call, like: "Oh, wait. I think I've been ignoring the most personal element of the story." That is, the part I'm the most scared to acknowledge.

Sim: *So you think you're over the hump now, that you can see daylight at the end of the tunnel?*

Thompson: No. *[Sim laughs]* But I have confidence that what I'm changing is *going* to work; it's just not working *yet.*

Sim: *Is it now at the stage where you want to ask other people if you think you're making the right choices? It sounded like it's more—*

Thompson: No, I'm still at the stage where I want to avoid people's input and finish the first draft, basically.

Sim: *And then say, "Okay, does this make sense to you or does this—?"*

Thompson: At that point, I will open the flood gates to other people's input before starting the final drawing phase. Cartoonists tend to separate, you know, the final drawing process so much from the first draft.

Sim: *There is the actual creativity end of things, and then there's the nuts and bolts of just actually drawing it, actually sitting down and committing it to paper, which is far less of a mental or emotional activity and is really just trying to maintain a good technical consistency throughout.*

Thompson: I really like that process though. I don't know if it's because I'm lazy, but—

Sim: *The actual drawing—?*

Thompson: I like that meditative state when the main struggle is out of the way.

Sim: *Well, you have a very spontaneous, sensuous line that you use. I tend to see your style a lot the same—although it's a very different style—as Robert Crumb's in that when I look at it I go, "Man, this guy really enjoys drawing." The pleasure you both derive from drawing just oozes off of the page. My page, you look at it and go, "This guy is trying so hard to be as accurate as he can that I don't think he's having any fun here at all," but, you and Robert Crumb look as if you're enjoying a good steak or a nice glass of wine or something like that.*

Thompson: Thank you, that's very flattering. I do love the drawing process.

Sim: *The friends that you're consulting with, your ongoing consulting people, do you think they would mind being mentioned in print, do you just want to use first names or—I just find it really interesting that it's the same group you show your work to all the time.*

Thompson: No, I'd be game, and I think they would too.

Sim: *Give me their names, and tell me what it is that you think that they bring to your work that you find irreplaceable as a contribution.*

Thompson: First is Pegi Taylor. I went to art school for one semester—that's pretty much the extent of my secondary education—and she was my English instructor and favorite teacher. I actually hated art classes at art school and felt more educated in the humanities courses.

Pegi continues to be my English instructor nine years later, but she's also a very close friend and a life mentor. She's started to become more interested in comics—both her and her daughter now, who works in films—but previously, her knowledge of the medium was minimal, so she was coming at it from a literary angle, an academic and critical angle, so just to have that vantage point, means a lot to me. Beyond the books, she's been a sounding board for so many decisions in my life. Second would be Shannon Stewart. You might know Shannon Stewart—

Sim: *Did he used to work with Bob Burden?*

Thompson: Yes, he did.

Sim: *Yeah, I know Shannon.*

Thompson: He worked for Bob and then at Tundra, and then he worked for Oni Press—and he's a local friend, here in Portland and—quite apart from the fact that I think he's really, really smart—he has a really awesome, amazing knowledge of comics, much better than I have.

Sim: *Comics' idioms and story-telling in comics?*

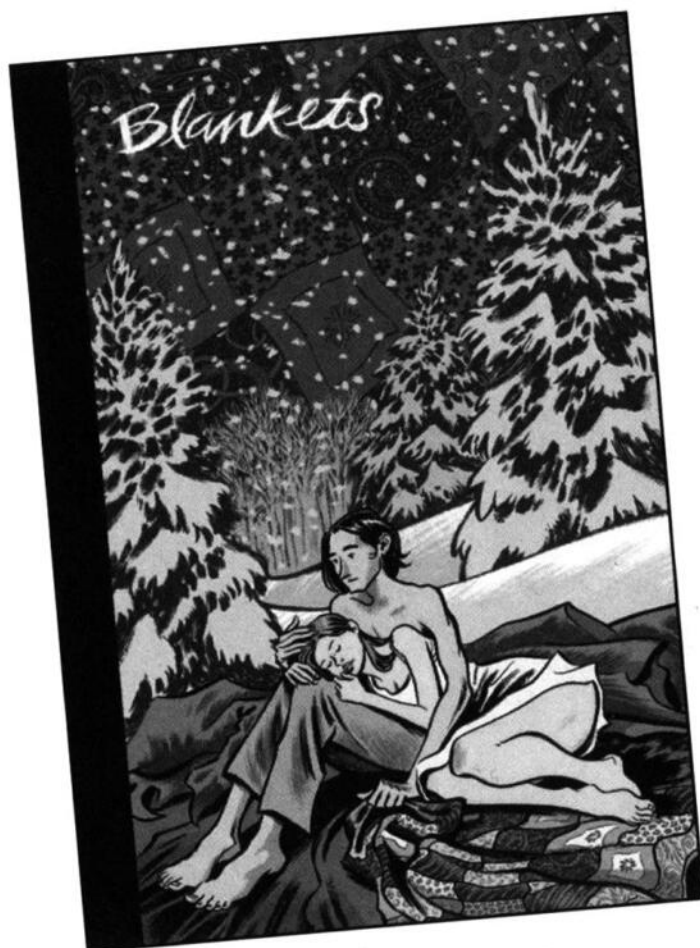
Thompson: Yeah, he's really absorbed a lot. I have to confess, I have a pretty limited knowledge of comics. I *love* comics, but I don't have as thorough a library as I should, and I'm not a collector really. I also think he understands me as a person. I have certain ways that I react to criticism, and he knows how to present things in a constructive way for me. I also confess to being the typical "sensitive *artiste.*" He presents things really constructively to me. His reaction seems to be about the things that are most important to me, which would be the concept or the content and the emotional reaction, and he is not approaching it right away as a copy editor or formalistically or something. And the third person would be my friend, Miriam Elman, who works as an immunologist here in Portland, and she has degrees in both mathematics and English. She is the best one for all the hypercritical proof-reading and formalistic—

Sim: *This is the one that you won't show a first draft to?*

Thompson: I'm often hesitant to, but that situation has changed, because I finally showed her the *Habibi* rough draft, and she responded with plenty of nourishing emotional support and enthusiasm. She's a very deliberate and analytical person though, so I know that when I show her something, she will dissect it very meticulously, and that can be very intimidating. *[Sim laughs]* Fourth? I would say the fourth would be my girlfriend. I have a different girlfriend now from when I was working on *Blankets* and *Chucky Rice*. But I would always say that the person who I'm dating, the one I'm the most intimate with, my trust is there.

Sim: *Do you want to give her name or fall back on the Kyle Baker dedication in* Why I Hate Saturn *"to whomever I'm going out with right now"?*

Thompson: Uhh—

Top: original roughs for a page in Blankets. *Bottom: the published version.*

Sim: I'm just teasing.
Thompson: I would acknowledge that for *Blankets*, it was Melissa.
Sim: And it's not still Melissa for the new work?
Thompson: No.
Sim: What is the new book called?
Thompson: *Habibi*, which is Arabic for "beloved." It's an Arabian Nights sort of tale of my own devising.
Sim: [teasing] *And the girlfriend on* Habibi *is?*
Thompson: *[laughs]* It's Esther.
Sim: Okay. we'll just use first names for the girlfriends. I don't know why; it just seems like something that you should do. Is there anything, just while we've been talking here, that you thought, boy I should bring this up, this sounds like it's part of what it is that Dave is driving at, or do you think we pretty much covered it here?
Thompson: I think we've covered it. I'm thinking again of that last chapter in *Blankets*, and I think it was Shannon who—I don't know, I can't even recall

"I don't want people to tell me what to do. But I do want them to point out things that don't flow for them."

how he pointed me in the right direction—I think he read the initial draft and said he thought that everything was working except for the last chapter, and that's exactly how I felt. So he kind of echoed my feelings, but the next time he saw it, I had rewritten the chapter, and it worked, but I can't remember all the process that took place in between there.
Sim: It was interesting. Will Eisner pointed out that he just wanted Dave Schreiner to tell him that he thought that something didn't work, and then he would go in and fix it himself. Will didn't want him to suggest a fix of his own.
Thompson: That's a large part of what I am describing.
Sim: Do your friends suggest fixes? Do they say, "Why don't you do this instead?" Or do they just say "I don't really like this part" or "I don't think this works as well as the rest of it"?
Thompson: The latter, and I don't know if I would think kindly of the other kind of input, because I don't want people to tell me what to do.

But I do want them to point out things that don't flow for them. There was a scene in *Blankets* that I drew about three or four times, because nobody seemed to understand what the hell I was trying to communicate, and maybe they still can't, but at least now I don't think of it as a clunky scene in the book.
Sim: Three or four times you did it?
Thompson: Yeah—not on the final art, but on the rough version of it.
Sim: I have to say: if I'd done something like that, I think I would have destroyed all other copies, because I wouldn't want to be competing against my own material, 100 years from now when I'm not around to tell people that they're crazy saying that this is the definitive version.
Thompson: *[laughs]* There are a few variations on the ending of *Ed the Happy Clown*.
Sim: I said to Chester—one of the times when I was going to be in Toronto and he was doing the latest redoing on Ed the Happy Clown*—I said, I'd love to come over and see where you are in it, and he said, no, absolutely no way. And then—just the other day because I'm going to be doing his interview tomorrow—I asked him: "If you take advice from Seth and other people, why didn't you want me to see what you're redoing on* Ed the Happy Clown*?" He said, "Well, I think I knew that I was crazy to be changing it again, so I didn't want you reading it and going, 'I think you're crazy to be changing this.'"*
Thompson: So he went against his own better judgment, you're saying?
Sim: As far as I know he's taken some stuff out, but I think he finally decided to just serialize it with annotations this time. At least the last couple of times that I've talked to him, he had given up the idea of redoing it. What I wanted to say to him was, "Chet, at some point up ahead you're going to have a 500-page book that consists of nothing but different versions of Ed the Happy Clown*. Don't you think it's better to just have just the one definitive version and get on with writing and drawing something else?"*
Thompson: *[after a lengthy pause]* Who knows?
Sim: That's sort of how conversations with Chet go, too. I appreciate your time with this.
Thompson: Thank you, Dave.

splendid pastoral moment. It's a hot summer day. It took a week to draw. It's a three-pager. I don't know what possessed me to do it. I did it thinking, like, "This is *Corto Maltese* [a trademarked character]. I can't publish this." But, I did it anyhow. That one, I actually did show to some people, you know. "What do you make of this thing?"

Craig Thompson stayed at my place when he was visiting, and we didn't look at comics too much at all, even though we're stylistically much closer than the mainstream guys that I had been discussing comics with. It's strange, I guess, because an idiosyncratic style is such an intense and personal world of its own that, when I'm with people who are doing the same type of stuff that I am, I tend to

"I would never watch films. It just wasn't part of my nature, and I'd rebel against it."

think less of discussing comics with them than of my "second job," which I tend to think of as "having a social life," you know?

Sim: *Right, right. The other thing you've mentioned was working for the Japanese publisher where you said there's no escaping the editorial—*

Pope: Yeah.

Sim: *Do you want to talk a little bit about that?*

Pope: Yeah *[sighs]*. That was an even more highly developed process than the mainstream stuff that I'm doing for DC and that I've done for Marvel. I actually liked working with the Japanese in that method, because it's understood you're making something that is *entirely* commercial. The task was to tailor your abilities wholly in service to the commercial requirements. In a sense it was like a "folk focus group," a collective refinement and development of the entire concept from the initial idea on out, and—as a creative challenge I had never had before—it was interesting. It was far more like what I imagine the process is in trying to craft a hit pop song inside a commercial recording studio. You always know what the specific goal is—a hit record—which is unlike the situation I have working on *THB* or some of the stuff that [laughs] I'm not sure *what* some of these drawings, comic drawings, that I'm doing are about. They're more like free jazz or something—that's an old analogy I've used. But with the Japanese, they would say, we'd like to develop a story with a young male character. Then everything was very "hands-on," so it was almost like the old movie "studio system," truly, where I was the director, but then the producer—my editor—was really "hands-on" and his vision, I would say wasn't *equal* to mine, but he really had a vision. *He* was guiding me. *He* was the portal into Japanese publishing. *He* was the one putting everyone to work.

Sim: *How much "fixing" did you have to do? Like did you get stuff finished and then have to go in and have to do new pages or—?*

Pope: They were very, like *[considering it in retrospect]*, strangely "*zen*" about it. You know, I worked for them for five years. I think I produced two-hundred and fifty pages.

Sim: *Right.*

Pope: And they published like twelve pages. In a

Paul Pope Interview

Paul Pope is the creator of the comics series THB, Heavy Liquid, *and* 100%, *plus the graphic novels* Sin Titulo, The Ballad of Dr. Richardson, The One-Trick Rip-Off, *and* Escapo. *He is currently working on the upcoming* Batman: Year 100. *Dave Sim interviewed Pope on February 25. Dave did the transcription; Dave and Craig Miller edited the text.*

Sim: *Just before I turned the tape on you, were saying that you really have three different experiences with—not with doing graphic novels—but three different experiences of doing comics. Do you see value in getting input on your work before it's published? I mean, everybody wants people to read their work when it comes out, but Chester [Brown] and Craig Thompson are very interested in what three or four particular people have to say. "Don't sugar-coat it; give it to me straight. If you think something doesn't work, tell me." And then Chester will take the advice or not take the advice, but he wants that fresh pair of eyes looking at the work.*

Pope: Yeah.

Sim: *In my case I wasn't interested in having an editor, and I would never show any part of* Cerebus *to anyone ahead of time.*

Pope: So, when Diana [Schutz] was doing the copy-editing, for example, was she looking at the boards, or was she reading the script?

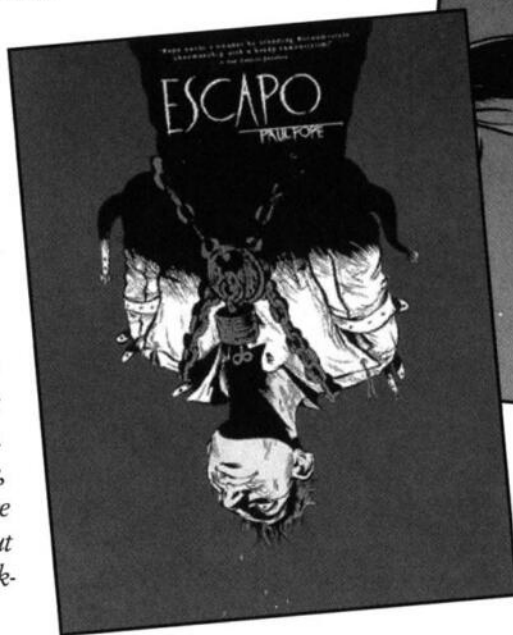
Sim: *No, she just proofread the stuff in the back of the book. That was all. Just the typesetting.*

Pope: Oh, I see.

Sim: *She never looked at the actual story. I wasn't interested in even having proofreading done on that, let alone editing.*

Pope: Yeah.

Sim: *So, in your case, where would you be in that spectrum?*

Pope: Well, I'm actually kind of in your camp, to tell you the truth, and it's not even necessarily because I want to be. It's funny now, because living down here—I mean, in New York—there are so many cartoonists that I see on a regular basis, and a lot of illustrators too. I actually have quite a bit in common with them, as well, which I was equally surprised to learn, in terms of things like schooling and stuff. A friend of mine pointed out, that's the good thing you learn in art school. You learn *some* stuff in art school, [but] the most valuable thing you should learn is—whatever your individual process—you need to *have* a process. You need to know where you get an idea and how you follow it through. My roots are in self-publishing, where it can tend to get a little bit "solipsistically stultifying," to the point where you just don't know if you're ever going to have the confidence to start working again. I think it might just be an aspect of self-publishing that it doesn't really occur to you to show your work.

The question you're framing is actually more interesting than what I thought you were going to ask me. I think the truth is that it just doesn't *occur to me* to ask other people, because for one thing when you're in the kind of frenetic, creative moment—for me, it's usually in the middle of the night. At that point, a lot of times, the stuff is so protean and so fragile that I don't really know if I'd *want* anybody to talk with about it. When I was in school, I knew this poet, and he said a good poem took six months to write. He would really labour over a word. I know that impressed me, this idea that you work at it and polish it until it's published, but until it's published, it's a living document that you're free to change and work with.

Sim: *Right.*

Pope: This summer, actually I did a thing that was an experiment. I don't even know if I'm going to publish it. It's a conversation between me and [Hugo Pratt's legendary character] Corto Maltese on a beach, and I'm telling him why I quit smoking.

Sim: [laughs] *Right.*

Pope: We have a drink, and it's just this really placid,

way it was strangely zen-like, but it was also like living in a Kafka novel. They paid me. I went over there, they paid me a per diem when I was there, they gave me tons of gifts, and then they broke the contract and gave me a severance at the end. It was really strange.

I think they just decided in the late 90s—I quit working with them about that time—whatever experiment they had been attempting in the 90s with bringing in select individuals from among the foreign artists, you know, like Moebius and Matt Kelly and a bunch of people from Europe, not a lot, maybe forty others, they just decided, you know, "Well, we've done this." And at the end of the day they decided they wanted Japanese comics by Japanese artists.

Sim: *Right, right. At the beginning of the experiment, was there a pressure to draw in the Japanese style, or did they want Paul Pope?*

Pope: No, they wanted me. They thought that my storytelling method was sufficiently Manga to give a try at working with me and me working with them. It was like grad school for Japanese comics. I had a raw material look they wanted, and then we had to see if that look could be refined within their working method so that it matched their commercial perceptions. In a way it's made me more marketable in the States and Europe, because I came back with a set of skills that are, you know *[laughs]* unusual if nothing else. It's funny now that there's so much much of it [Manga] being published over here now, because in the 90s there were really wasn't that much. Even stuff like *Akira* that was, you know, a *classic,* or *Astro Boy*—it was a lot harder to get ahold of that stuff. That was even just, you know, five or ten years ago.

Now I'm working with [Bob] Schreck. He's definitely my favorite editor personally, but his function in *my* case isn't so much to act like the "Threshold Guardian of Batman." Rather, you know, he looks my work over and—he knows his comics and stuff like that. He knows *good* comics but it seems to me that a lot of time his input stems more from his interest in film. So he'll say, if we're dealing with a specific storytelling problem, "Have you seen this film?" And he'll recommend that I watch the film he's using as an example. So because of him I actually bought a DVD player.

Sim: *You were going broke just going out to watch movies everywhere!*

Pope: *[Laughs]* Before, I would never watch films. It just wasn't part of my nature, and I'd rebel against it. So I've only recently started watching films, and it's really because of him.

[For my Batman story] I gave Schreck a premise, and he was ready to go. We worked together in the past. He knows I can deliver it. He's seen me do it. Paul Levitz wanted me to give them a script, so I basically sat down and worked out a "more than a film treatment, less than a short story novelization," you might say, of a two-hundred-page comic book story. And that was very helpful. I kind of took a cue from Eisner's book early on where you leave holes in the writing so that you have room to improvise.

Sim: *Right.*

Pope: But in this case, I mean, I'm thinking of it more like the crafting of a hit record or something, where you really have to—you can't leave it entirely up to your intuitive processes. There's still tons of room for intuition to play its part in this Batman thing. But, at the end of the day, it's probably not like the other stuff I've done in terms of the construction of the visuals and the content of the drawing, the subject matter.

Sim: *Right.*

Pope: I did have to hammer out a pretty tight script—the "whodunit" aspects, and how you tie all the threads together in the third act. It's helpful in this stage, with this type of a tightly-plotted, tightly-scripted story, to *hit* the hundred-page mark and to be at the point in the story that you intended to be

"[I]n Manga...the character's eyes are the important thing....They want you to identify with who the character *is,* not with what they *do.*"

as opposed to, say, *THB* which is, you know, Truly Epic and so tends to grow more organically as it goes along. There, I'll have some vague notion that I want to do something about musicians with instruments—you know, the kind of improvisational stuff that you would do with *Cerebus.*

Sim: *Leave space for something, and "let's see where this goes, and let's not go in with any presupposition about it."*

So the situation with Bob Schreck at DC is, as you say, about the best situation you've had dealing editorially with somebody.

Pope: He's great, because he doesn't treat me like sort of a "Picasso Junior." "You're the artist here, and if you need, you know, a year-and a half to draw that page, go ahead," because at the bottom of this, the bottom line is it's still a commercial assignment. This thing has got to come out before the movie does, or right around that time, you know, "marketing-wise." And he's an editor, but he's also a friend. He knows how to get me to get me working on it. Sometimes it's flattery, sometimes it encouragement, sometimes it's—well, you know him—he just opens Holy Hell before you.

Sim: [laughs] *Right.*

Pope: But it works!

Sim: *Yeah.*

Pope: But when I'm working on the work—when I feel the anxiety or I feel the uncertainty—that's more where I think the way you do, because artistically, comics are something that you can only be praised for *after* you've done them. It's definitely not like sports with the instant gratification, and I

wasn't a sports kid, you know. I didn't get in with that. I wasn't a team player, and the anxiety and the uncertainty are probably an extension of that necessarily delayed favorable response.

Sim: *Yeah.*

Pope: I definitely fall a little more into your camp. There are still always going to be the personal technical questions about, you know, what it takes to motivate yourself to produce enough work and put in enough time at the board and stuff like that.

Sim: *Let me try to tie this all up at the end here with one sort of question that I hope will give some sharper definition to your situation relative to "Advise and Consent": because you've had this experience with the* Manga *environment and with mainstream comics at DC and Marvel, has any part of that—and as you say you've had a really good experience with Bob Schreck—has any part of that ever made you think that you'd like to import some of that into your self-publishing side?*

Pope: Yeah, I think so, because I think the best of the education I got from *Manga* was the realization that what they *see*, what they *perceive* as being good—what we call—comics, it's not the story for them, it's the characters. They want to get as deeply as possible into who the character is. They would say, you know, if they were doing, for example, *Batman*—I'll use that as an example because we've been discussing *Batman.*

Sim: *Right.*

Pope: They would say, "We don't want to see a story about a guy in costume, you know, hitting people. We want the reader to know what it *feels like* to be Batman." And this is why in Manga there's such an emphasis about the eyes. The character's eyes are the important thing, and I really understood that. I see what they mean. They want you to identify with who the character *is*, not with what they *do*. Even with something like *Terry and the Pirates*, you never get a good sense of what Pat Ryan's internal monologue is.

"[W]hen someone like Eisner dies...it ups the ante. Whatever you've been doing, it throws a scare into you, and you get more serious."

Sim: *Right.*

Pope: You see him do stuff. He's a tough guy, this and that. And that searching for the inward motivations of the characters has, I believe, really fed into my work on THB, especially because those characters are so real to me. Whereas *Batman* is—I have *a version* of *Batman*, it's *my Batman*—but I didn't create him. At the end of the day, it's a commercial project.

When it's done, they own it, so I get paid what I get paid and get whatever rewards comes from having done *Batman.*

Sim: *Right.*

Pope: But at the end of the day, if it's something like *THB*, it's something I've actually created. It's *my* story. But that Manga sensibility feeds into my version of Batman, as well. That's why he's such a physical entity the way I depict him and why he fails at things—because I really want the reader to identify with him.

Sim: *What you're saying is that you imported from the* Manga *sensibility their concept that the interior of the character, the nature of the character and the character's internal emotional life, takes precedence—not only over the storytelling: the way the story is told—but even takes precedence over the story itself?*

Pope: Yeah, I think even with Batman, going in, you've got a knowledge of the specific structure—there are things you "go to" *Batman* for. In the same way with pop music: if you listened to, even something like the Beatles, I mean it still does something that pop songs do. They just happened to do it brilliantly. Those are examples, right?

Sim: *Yeah, well, forty years later, there is no question that those songs still grab your attention in the supermarket.*

Pope: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

Sim: *If they've got the radio playing, and a Beatles tune or a John Lennon tune comes on, it generates a greater and more sudden sense of wakefulness than just about anybody else coming across.*

Pope: Yeah, I'd say. And I think that in that sense, you know, Batman is a good comparison. They're not quite exactly—you know—"frameable," but they're pretty close.

Sim: *Okay, dude, I said that was going to be my last question, so now I'll make my last, last question.*

Pope: *[Laughs]*

Sim: *Apart from importing the sensibility, would you ever import the consultation idea and say—as a friend—let's get Bob Schreck to look at* THB *and try and import his means of motivation to my personal intellectual property?*

Pope: You know, I've got to say I think I am a little more in your camp on this, because it's kind of inconceivable. I think the only person I would allow in on *THB* and my personal works at that "mastermind" level is maybe my sister, Erika. She's the only person from whom I'd really want input. I guess it's just when you write something as personal as a self-published title, it's just too close to home to cast a wider net than that. In a way it's kind of sad, though, that a lot of people I know that I really respect are pretty busy, so they don't really have the spare time to take off, come down to my place and just, you know, hang out and drink some wine and look at comics and talk about them, which is what we used to do in college, in art school.

Sim: *Right.*

Pope: In a sense, I think this is an inherent quality in the "long-distance runner" aspect of comics. You know who your heroes are; you know your own pantheon. Then when someone like Eisner dies, you know, it ups the ante. Whatever you've been doing, it throws a scare into you, and you get more

A character from THB *puts on a show behind Mrs. Thatcher in* Guys

serious. I guess it just seem like the venerable ones, they're getting fewer and farther between, but the medium is still flying, and it's alive. It's serious work, and it's a *lot* of work, and it's also very solitary—*very solitary*—work.

Sim: *Yes, I think "by necessity," although some people would disagree with that. If you can't relish the idea of spending fifteen hours in a room by yourself, watching what your hand is doing, you're in the wrong business.*

Pope: Yeah.

Sim: *When you mentioned your sister, Erika, just at the end there, have you ever consulted with her on your work or gotten her input on your work?*

Pope: I have, I have! Because she's a writer—she's not published, but she's interested in screenplays. She has these great ideas for stories, and she's got her own ambitions and things. She's very funny, for one thing, and she's very perceptive. She really knows how to dramatize a solution to an interesting story problem. And I came to her a couple of times with some very specific—and sort of abstract—dramatic problems with *THB*. I don't want to get too technical about it, but I had this scene—it wasn't a key scene, but it was an important scene—where I wanted to show how a potential business partner of HR's father is won over in the end, because of this man's being impressed by his daughter.

Sim: *Right.*

Pope: And I was like, how would you go about doing this? And she gave me a great idea. "Why don't you give him, like, a school ring that he wears that belonged to his daughter, and HR recognizes the school ring and starts the conversation about that?" And so that was like a perfect story convention—you know—a little dramatic device. I needed something like that, and I thought that was a really great idea, because it allows them to have this conversation which we're observing—a conversation between an older man and a young girl and just how charming she is, how smart she is. It's a brief scene, but it does something important to the story. That was like a storytelling question from one storyteller to another. But, in terms of asking, "This drawing, does it look too realistic *[laughs]*, or have I added too much to this picture?" I've never really asked those kind of questions.

Sim: *No, this was the point that I made back on the panel, where all of this originated from. The best example I would be able to give on my own part was the text pieces on* Jaka's Story. *There wasn't an editor in the world that I could've showed that to who would have said, "This works." They would say, "No, this isn't comics, this just brings everything to a crashing halt. Ah, I wouldn't do it!" But I still think it was the right creative decision.*

Pope: Yeah and, you know, at the end of the day, only *you* would *know* that.

Sim: *Yeah.*

Pope: I think that's part of what has made your stuff so potent and, to me, this is what actually makes great comics, to tell the truth. You've done some great work. This is what makes for the integrity of the artistic vision. It's something that people argue about, but, I mean cartooning is classically the "one guy writing and drawing." Like, I love Chester Brown's comics. I think he's amazing. I was actually re-reading his adaptations of the Gospels, and it's just amazing stuff, and I could imagine that seeming like a pretty un-commercial or an unsound editorial decision to make at the time, too—and I think that only he would really know if it's the right or wrong decision to make.

Sim: *I think it comes down to what level of risks you are willing to take.*

Pope: Mm-hm.

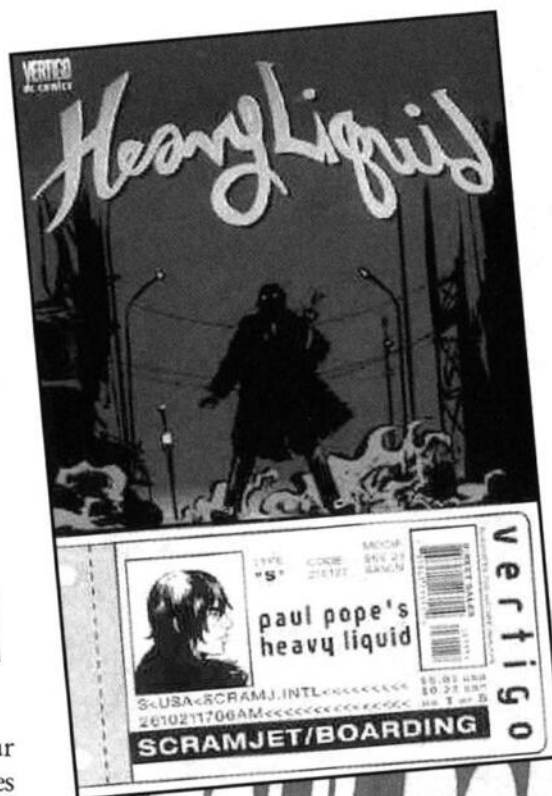
Sim: *And at that point my sensibility on it was that you're already going to have a certain amount of self doubt, and having somebody else present external self-doubt to me just sort of doubles the potential anxiety level. You know: "I've got enough, enough—qualms—about putting these text pieces in here as it is without going and asking Denny O'Neil if he thinks it works."*

Pope: *[Laughs]*

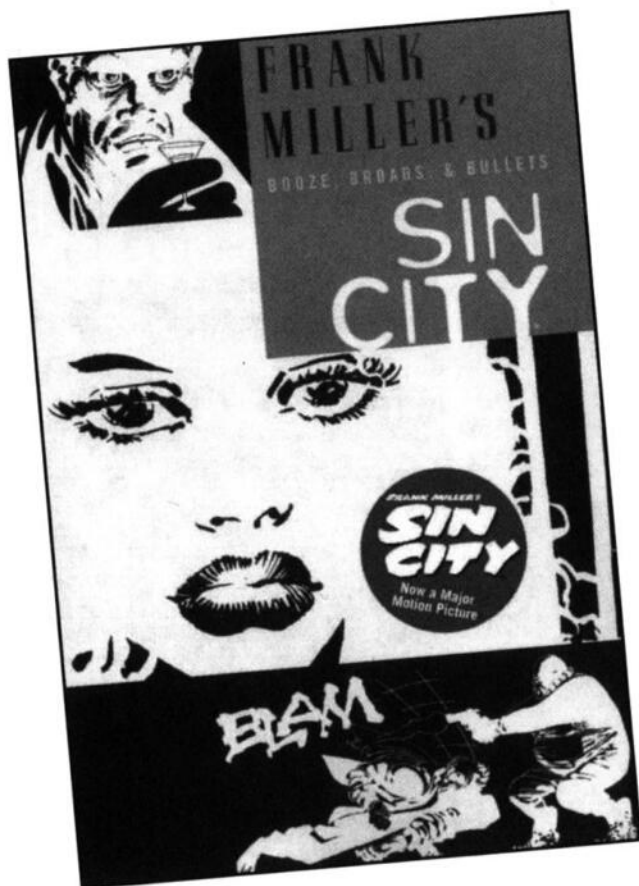
Sim: *You know what I mean?*

Pope: Yeah, and at the end of the day, too, I think you know. Your gut instinct will tell you if it's right or wrong.

Sim: *Yeah.*

Pope: I think the important thing to tell the young people reading this—the ones who are reading it to help them decide what works best for them in getting advice or not getting advice—is to communicate that it's all really just a matter of experimenting with what works for you—including tools, for that matter. It's your decision-making, your story, and your tools, so try everything to see what works best for you.

Frank Miller Interview

Frank Miller has been a dominant creative force in comics over the past twenty-five years with his work on Daredevil, Elektra, Batman, Ronin, *and* Sin City, *plus much more. Dave Sim interviewed Miller on February 27. Dave did the transcription; Dave, Frank, and Craig Miller edited the text.*

Sim: *Just to sketch in what the idea is—this started with a panel that I did with Will Eisner and Chester Brown—in June [2004]—that was on the graphic novel.*
Miller: That must have been fun.
Sim: *It was. And now I've got the tape, so I started transcribing it, because I'm doing my remembrance of Will for* Following Cerebus *number four.*
Miller: Right, right
Sim: *But then I hit this part where Peter Birkemoe from* The Beguiling*—who is moderating—asked about editing, and what our experience was with editing, and getting advice on our graphic novels, and what sort of input did we get. It was very funny, because Will was just sort of like pawing the table and shifting around in his seat, because he just couldn't wait to start answering that question. And I think in a lot of ways it was because he's such a polite guy, there was no way that he could never say to me face-to-face, "So what is your problem with editors anyway?"*
Miller: Yeah.
Sim: *But this gave him an opportunity to get his side on the record.*
Miller: Yeah.
Sim: *And then Chester Brown mentioned, you know, he doesn't have editors, but he shows his stuff to Seth and Kris, and Mark Askwith. He takes some of their advice, and he doesn't take other advice—*
Miller: Mm-hm.
Sim: *And then I talked to Paul Pope, and he was comparing the Japanese editorial method with the New York editorial method—particularly Bob Schreck, whom he is very enthusiastic about—*
Miller: Right.
Sim: *—and then the fact that he doesn't want any input at all on his personal stuff.*
Miller: Yeah.
Sim: *And in my own case, I never wanted to get advice or recommendations. I was usually taking so many chances in my own mind that if anybody said a discouraging word. I might back right off.*
Miller: Right *[laughs]*, yes.
Sim: *Things like the text pieces in* Jaka's Story, *where if I had showed that to any editor, they would have said, you know, "This doesn't work."*
Miller: "A write-off." Yeah.
Sim: *So, with your own experience on this—going all the way back to* Ronin *I guess would be your first graphic novel—*
Miller: Mm-hm.
Sim: *—what's your policy on those things?*
Miller: Well on *Ronin* there was no editor. I mean, I was listed as editor, which meant there was none.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: And then I just made sure it was proofread. And that was exhilarating; it was wonderful. I've since come to believe that I do like to have an editor, but, I mean, the perfect example is Diana [Schutz, Frank's editor at Dark Horse Comics]—that's an example of someone who's not trying to run the show, but someone who's watching my back.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: And who is hustling my stuff through production. That way I'm just free to draw what I want *[laughs]*, and also my spelling gets fixed.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: We all have our spelling lapses that way. With Schreck, it's more like—I'm working with DC Comics, with Batman and all that—and you know he's like the go-between, between me and this massive corporation—
Sim: *Right.*

Miller: —over a half-billion-dollar franchise. So he's *got* to be there. If I just "dropped it on him," I'd probably never get anything through them.
Sim: *That's true. How much negotiation is there there?*
Miller: Um —
Sim: *Is it an uncomfortable level of negotiation or a —*
Miller: No, it's—it's—it's—I like to refer to it as a "Healthy Creative Tension."
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: Paul Levitz, in many ways, is the gate keeper, and I'm kind of crashing the gate.
Sim: *Or trying to.*
Miller: Right. So there's always a give-and-take.
Sim: *Right. Now, on the* Sin City *stuff, which is the more personal stuff—*
Miller: Really.

"There is something about *Sin City* where I don't really allow much of any input on anything."

Sim: *This is the stuff that is "100% Frank Miller."*
Miller: Yeah.
Sim: *Is Diana the only person that you consult with on it? Are there other people that you show it to?*
Miller: Well, there's Lynn [Varley, Miller's wife and frequent colorist].
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: I mean, she'll *see* it, but *generally* it goes straight from me *[reconsiders]—always* goes straight from me to Diana and, you know, I'll show it to *friends*, but that's pretty much it.
Sim: *Are you showing it to friends to get feedback that you might change something?*
Miller: No, not really with *Sin City*. There is something about *Sin City* where I don't really allow much of any input on anything. I mean, the *kind of input* that I would generally go for would be Diana saying, "Her head's too big." *[Sim laughs]* What are *you* laughing about? *You* know what it's like.*
Sim: *Well, that sounds like what Will was talking about with Dave Schreiner editing him at Kitchen Sink—he said that Dave Schreiner served as his surrogate reader.*
Miller: That's exactly it. I think that that—in something that's an *original*—is the best and most valuable purpose for an editor. If someone says, "This is kind of weird," or "I don't understand what's going on here," that kind of thing—I don't get *much* of that, I'm a pretty good storyteller—but that's what I'm looking for. It's a very different process to be working on *Sin City* than to be working on *Batman*, because on the one it's like I'm working on a half-billion dollar franchise, and on the other I can do whatever the hell I want.
Sim: *Right, right. One of the questions that Chester asked Will—and I think he really threw Will off when he asked him this—was: Were there occasions when Dave Schreiner would say, "I don't understand this part here, I think you should be doing something different," and did Will ever say, "No, I think it works just fine; we'll leave it"?*
Miller: Mm-hm.
Sim: *And I got the impression from Will's reaction that, no, that was not the case, and I think that Will was kind thrown off to realize that any time Dave Schreiner said, "There's a problem here," one way or the other Will would fix it.*
Miller: I think part of that was also Will's Depression Era ethic.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: That whole generation thought that the highest position you could ever have is "publisher."
Sim: [laughing] *Right.*
Miller: And I happen to be of that generation that thinks the highest position you can ever have is "author." You can certainly be both, but there was always a "work ethic thing" about Will. When I was in his studio—when we were doing the book together—and I saw how he worked, it was nothing like the big sloppy place *I've* got. It looked like it could have been a *dentist's* office.
Sim: [laughs] *Is that right? Yeah?*
Miller: Yeah, and when we argued—which we often did—he would be arguing as a businessman at almost every turn. I think there was a "sense" to the man that he wanted to prove himself as a businessman. He didn't realize that he had *already* proved

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**I was laughing because it was such a Diana Schutz way of putting it. Not, "Don't you think her head's too big?" or "I was wondering if maybe her head was too big." Just the flat assertion, "Her head's too big." She knew better than to talk to me like that, but I did indeed "know what it's like."*

himself—as an *artist*.
Sim: *Will said that he would do the dummy copy of his graphic novel, like do the whole—*
Miller: *[laughing explosively]* They're beautiful.
Sim: *Yeah.*
Miller: Damn! *[laughs]* What was *with* that guy? He did a *whole dummy copy—*
Sim: *Yeah, the whole graphic novel, only it's just on typewriter paper and in pencil instead of on finished art boards. That was the impression I got.*
Miller: Then it gets submitted to the publisher for approval.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: *My* publishers never know *what* they're going to get.
Sim: *That was my question. When do you first submit material? Or do you tell them, "You don't get to see it until they're finished pages"?*
Miller: Um, what *usually* happens—well, with the *Batman* stuff for instance—is I'll hang out at a saloon with Schreck—
Sim: [laughs] *Right.*
Miller: —and tell him what I'm up to, and we'll go over it, you know, and then I'll just—the next stage is pretty much a finished book.
Sim: *Really?*
Miller: When I did *DK 2 [Dark Knight 2]*, I gave them *pencilled* pages because I wasn't *lettering* it.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: With the new *Batman* project, I'm executing the whole thing. But I did give them a written *plot* and everything.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: With *Sin City*, I pretty much send it in. I mean I talk it over because, you know, you don't want to be too *lonely* in your life, and Diana is as much a muse as she is an editor. And so I'll *tell her* what's going on, but it's a pretty loose situation.
Sim: *Does she makes suggestions? As I said with Chester and Seth, Seth looks at his stuff, and Chester gives it to him for exactly that kind of feedback on what he sees to be plot inconsistencies or transitions that don't work or something like that, and then Chet picks and chooses and says either, "Yeah, I agree with that, I'll fix that," or he says, "No, I don't think this is actually a problem, so I'm going to leave it."*
Miller: But you know it's *[laughs]* like *you*, I've been at this game a lot longer than Chester.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: And I've made almost all the mistakes that you can make. I can still make mistakes, but not as many.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: So, that just isn't likely to surface as the issue as often. I mean, once you've really kind of cracked the nut on the storytelling—it doesn't mean you reach a *plateau*, you've got to keep *climbing*—but it means that you're just not second-guessing yourself as much.
Sim: *Do you talk the book over with Lynn?*
Miller: No, I come up with my own stories.
Sim: *Will had a couple of stories about showing his dummy copies to Ann. He said, for the first twenty-five years of their marriage, he didn't think she really knew what he did for a living.*
Miller: *[laughs]*
Sim: *He might have been a bootlegger or something. He was just gone all day. And then—later in life, I guess around the graphic novel time period—she became one of his people that he showed the book to. Again, to get some feedback.*

"I happen to be of that generation that thinks the highest position you can ever have is 'author.'"

Miller: Yeah. I'm more likely to show my stuff to people like Bill Sienkiewicz and Paul Pope, who are close enough to be neighbors. I'll have them over to my studio, and I'll show them, you know—I just showed them a hundred and twenty or so pages of my next book. It's not likely that they're going to suggest *changes*, but it gives me a sense of connection.
Sim: *Right.*
Miller: This is a lonely job
Sim: *Tell me about it.*
Miller: Yeah.
Sim: *So, so—*
Miller: *[laughs]* —and I've never done three hundred of *anything*.
Sim: [laughs] *So, Bill Sienkiewicz comes over, and you say, "Here. Do you want to look at the hundred and twenty pages I've got done on this?" and he goes, "Great, great." Does he comment as he's going through it?*
Miller: Bill goes really *quiet* looking a job over. I mean, he gets very intense, and I kind of—almost want to leave the room. For one thing. I always feel

like my pants are down around my *ankles* whenever someone is looking at my work.

Sim: [laughs] *Yeah.*

Miller: But then he gives a very intense review. Often he'll just be really *cheerful* and say he really *likes* it, and then the next morning I'll get up and check my e-mail, and there'll be a really insightful portrait of what I've done. And Pope is similar. They're both very quiet men.

Sim: *But this feedback that they're giving you—it doesn't compel you to actually change anything, though.*

Miller: Not that it has so far. I think what it does, I think that we're starting to—how do I put this? Back when I first came into comics in the late 70s, there was a wondrous community of all of us—*slaves*—but we got along great, and we challenged each other, and we got each other working hard, and my goal since returning to town *[Miller moved back to New York in 2001]* has been to start reigniting some of that. Because I don't like isolation. I like to see what Paul Pope is doing, 'cause it makes me go "Shit, I better really kick ass tomorrow."

Sim: [laughing] *Right.*

Miller: And the same with me and Bill. But it's slow forming, because the industry is completely fragmented. It's Balkanized.

Sim: *That's very unusual, because New York was like one big clubby community—*

Miller: Yeah, I know.

Sim: *—back when you started. [Neal Adams's] Continuity [Associates] and Upstarts [the studio that consisted of Howard Chaykin, Frank Miller, and Walt Simonson], there were different studios, but there was always sort of the First Friday get togethers.*

Miller: Oh, I *know*. But it's hard to reignite that also because, frankly, we've become middle-aged.

Sim: [laughs] *This is true. It might still be going on, but they don't invite the old folks.*

Miller: *[laughs]* And also most of my old buds have moved up there.

Sim: *Right.*

Miller: It's just a little more difficult. Everybody has gotten married, they've got kids, and all these crazy things like that.

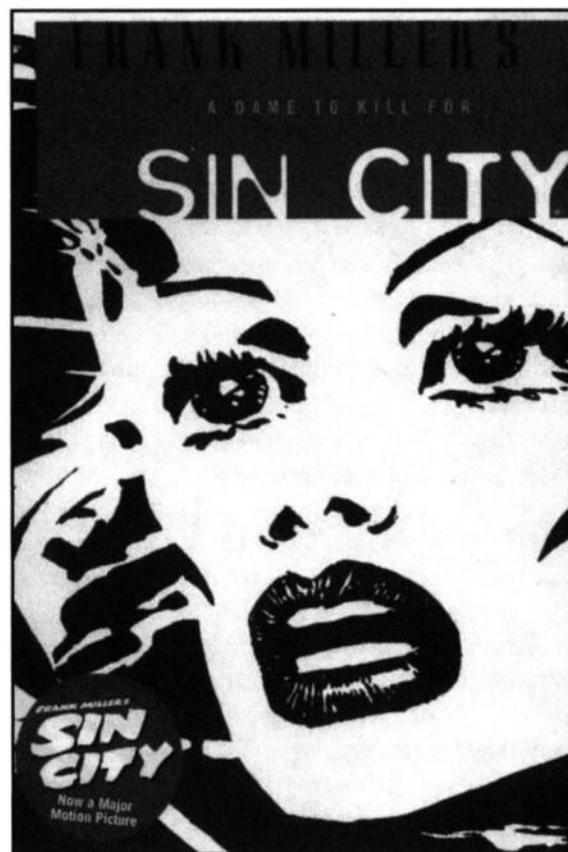
"You know, I don't *believe in* writer's block. I don't believe that exists. Some days you don't feel like working."

Sim: *Yeah, that's always a complicating factor.*

Miller: *[laughing at Sim's flat, disingenuous tone]*

Sim: [rising to the bait] *Was that a diplomatic way of putting that?*

Miller: *[still laughing]* That was a pretty diplomatic way of putting it, yeah.

Sim: *Well, thank you. Paul Pope said that he's not really much of a one for getting advice, so he'd basically be showing you his work just in that same "not really wanting to be*

isolated" way.

Miller: Yeah, that's pretty much what we do. I mean, I'm not really looking for help here. I've got a big library and bookcases full of die-cast metal cars, and I've got a lot of material and a fair amount of experience, so I'm not really looking for guidance.

Sim: *Right.*

Miller: Also *you* know what it's like to have stories bursting out of your guts. You *can't* ask somebody to help you with them.

Sim: *Yeah. This whole thing really got started because I realized—if I weren't the odd man out entirely, I was definitely the odd man out on the panel, anyway, between Will and Chester, and I just couldn't relate to the idea of soliciting a response with the idea that I would actually change something in my work. But then I've never been a "writer's block" kind of guy. My problem was "writer's flood"; how do I hold back "writer's flood"?*

Miller: Yeah. That was also my other problem. You know, I don't *believe in* writer's block. I don't believe that exists. Some days you don't feel like working. *[Sim laughs]* You know, but you kick ass the next day.

Sim: *So that makes a good name for it.*

Miller: What?

Sim: *To call it "writer's block" instead of calling it "I don't feel like working today."*

Miller: Yeah, right. *[Laughs]* I mean, that's what I really believe it is, unless there is some psychological malfunction that I just haven't experienced and don't understand.

Sim: *Yeah. "I don't feel like working today" or "I'm hung over"—*

Miller: *[laughing]* Well, there's *that*. There're all *kinds* of reasons. Like: "I just had a fight with my wife."

I think it's a false term. At least, it is in my experience. I do think that one of the things that you're addressing here—and it's an undercurrent in our conversation right now—is that there is a difference between regarding yourself as an employee and as an author. I think that the idea of looking for—of soliciting—opinions can be a healthy thing for *any* artist to do, but there is a sense of—there're always strings. Will was such a *revolutionary*, but there was always a sense of a part of him that still viewed himself as an employee.

***Sim:** Mm-hm. As a matter of fact, I just wrote in my recollection that I think that was why—and I am convinced of this—that was why I think he saw you as his heir, as the preeminent writer/artist of your generation.*

Miller: *[totally disbelieving]* Yeah, right *[laughs]*.

***Sim:** And I think that a lot of that had to do with the fact that, like me, he sort of hedged his bets by doing the business side as well—*

***Miller:** Mm-hm.*

***Sim:** —and saying "This has to be done. Either I'm going to take on the business side of my creativity or, you know, I'm always going to be at the mercy of the bosses."*

Miller: Right.

***Sim:** Consequently there's a level of admiration for the buccaneer that just goes in there, the one guy against the corporation and who consistently comes out on top.*

Miller: Hey, Dave Sim just called me a *buccaneer*! *How* cool is *that*!?

Sim: [laughs]

Miller: *[laughs]*

Sim: [no hope of a straight answer] [in a New Yorker accent] *Yer a swashbucklah, Frank. Yer a total swashbucklah. Youse can take it from me, personally.*

Miller: I'm going to start swinging from ropes. *[Sim laughs]* I think it is fascinating because, you know, I mean you conquered. You Took the Hill. I mean, you *Published*.

Sim: [not sure where he's going with this] *Right.*

Miller: Will did *some* publishing. But what he mostly did was work *with* publishers, and in an amazingly old-fashioned way for such a forward-thinking man.

***Sim:** Mm-hm.*

Miller: The *work* was way ahead of its time and just about at every turn. I still think *Contract with God* was an atom bomb.

***Sim:** No question about it.*

Miller: You know, it's funny. I talk to you, I talk to Larry Marder, I talk to a couple of other people, and they all think of that book the same way. It made us all realize that it can be *permanent,* and it was an historic piece of work. But largely, if you think about it—given its historical importance—you don't see that book much.

***Sim:** That's true. When they had Will as the guest of honor at the Chicago Comicon the one year, and they asked for tribute material for the program booklet, basically I did my own—Gerhard and I did our own version—of the "if men are required to honor their agreements, is not God also so obligated?" page, that devastating page in the story—*

Miller: Oh, *yeah*. Oh, *yeah*.

***Sim:** —and had a whale of a time doing it and dedicated it "to Will Eisner from a couple o' Goyim"—*

Miller: *[laughs]*

***Sim:** —and of course, when I got the program booklet in, everyone else had done The Spirit.*

Miller: *[laughs]* They did what?

***Sim:** Everyone else had done The Spirit, whatever tribute they did, they did The Spirit and Dolan and whomever else and, you know, it's amazing to me that in the comic book field, that is still almost exclusively what Will is remembered for. And then people say, oh yeah, and he did all these graphic novels as well.*

Miller: Yeah. Actually, one time when I was introducing an Eisner Award and I felt I had to say *something,* and the best way I could put it was to thank him for *A Contract with God—[pause]—*and everything *before* and *since*.

Sim: [laughing] *Yeah. Yeah.* [mulling it over] *Maybe we're just weird. Maybe it's just our generation.*

Miller: *["what planet are you on?" tone]* I think we *are* certifiably *weird*, Dave.

Sim: [he's got me there] *Yeah. Yeah.*

Miller: There's no real discussion needed.

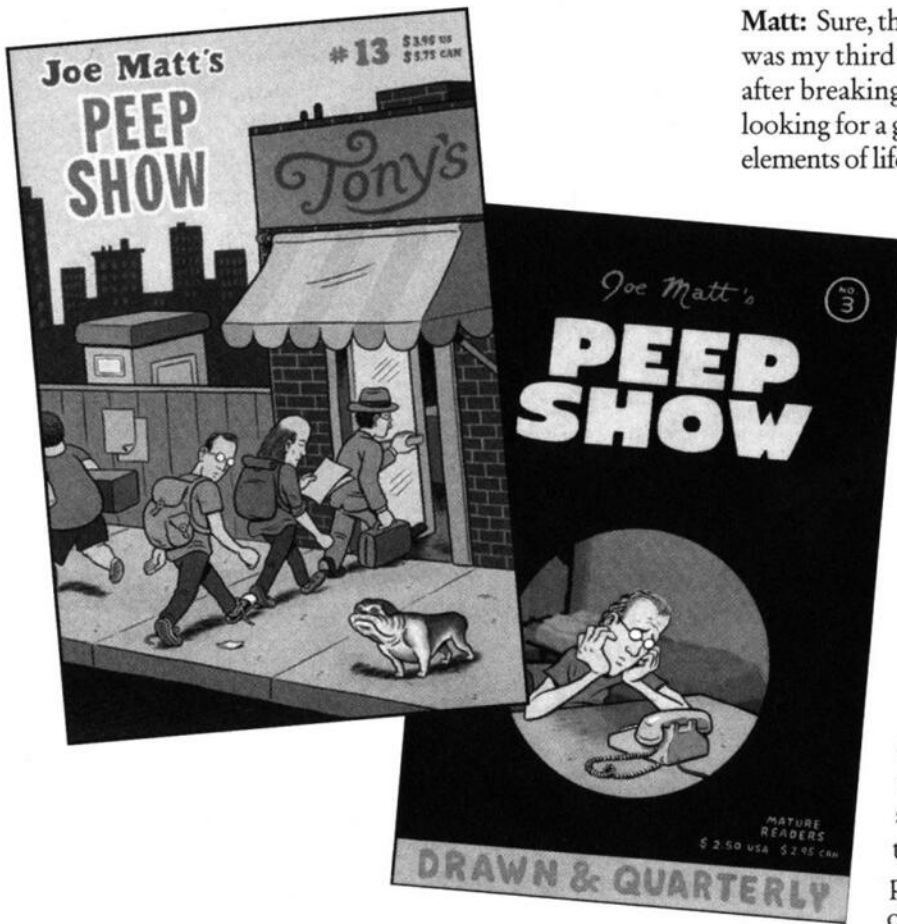
***Sim:** No doubt on that one.*

Miller: *[schoolyard sneer]* We draw CALM-ICK books.

Sim: [laughs] *That's right. "You draw funnybooks for a living. You got to be weird, kid. And don't you forget it."*

Miller: *[laughs]*.

Miller-inspired page from Church & State II

Joe Matt Interview

Joe Matt is the creator of Peep Show, The Poor Bastard, *and* Fair Weather. *Dave Sim interviewed Matt on February 27. Dave did the transcription; Dave, Joe, and Craig Miller edited the text.*

Matt: I haven't had an issue [of *Peep Show*] out in God knows how many years now.
Sim: *Yeah, I know. You lost the bet with Peter Birkemoe, and that was it.**
Matt: Yeah, but I'll take any attention I can get.
Sim: *Yeah, I know that. This is good. This is good. The thing was when I was doing the interview with Chet [Brown], he was talking about showing his stuff to Seth, and Seth makes his recommendations. Some of them Chet takes, and some of them he doesn't, and he said, "You should talk to Joe. You should talk to Joe about—" and he talked about an issue of* Peep Show *that you showed to them, and the two of them just mercilessly ripped it to shreds.*
Matt: That's true.
Sim: *Do you remember that?*

**In early 1999, Joe bet Beguiling owner Peter Birkemoe the original artwork to a three-page Adrian Tomine story against a Harvey Kurtzman original page from* Weird Science *that he could get three issues of* Peep Show *out before the end of the year 2000. One of the issues (#12) was already at the printer and needed only to have a cover drawn. Only one issue appeared since then, in early 2002 (#13). Six years after the bet was made, there's still no sign of issue 14.]*

Matt: Sure, that was my second issue. No, I think it was my third issue, actually. It was the first issue after breaking up with Trish and being single and looking for a girlfriend. I was trying to fictionalize elements of life I was documenting in order to spare people, and it really was terrible and lame. In issue three I had those characters Andy and Kim, and I was making Andy, like, a performance artist instead of a musician in a band. And I made him a juggler on the street, because I knew another guy who did that and, you know, it was like a lie that just gets worse and worse. *[Sim laughs]* Suddenly I'm trying to write dialogue about juggling and force the meaning of the character, and it got more and more convoluted and—they were right; it was a terrible issue. I just showed them the pencils, and when I got done with that, I just started over again from scratch. I couldn't invent these lies, this situation where it was just compounded. It got more and more out of my control.
Sim: *Yeah, if it's a musician, it's not a juggler. You were striking more false notes than true notes in a story that was supposed to be autobiographical.*
Matt: Exactly and, you know, in the last year that I've been in Hollywood, I wrote this pilot for HBO for the "Poor Bastard" TV show with these two other guys, and it was kind of the same thing. They kept arbitrarily changing things and, and—
Sim: *Give me an example. What would they change?*
Matt: I had Chester and Seth and I doing a signing at the Beguiling, and I had this kid look at our comics to see what they were. And I had Chester's *Louis Riel* there, and teenagers would come up and didn't know who the hell he was—confused by this historical figure in a comic book instead of a superhero—and *Ed the Happy Clown*, and these guys that I was writing with wanted to change *Ed the Happy Clown* to *Vagina Man,* because they thought it sounded funnier. As if Chester would do a character called *Vagina Man.* And it just went on from there. So, you're sitting there writing about this *Vagina Man* character or, at least, *they* are, and I couldn't *stand it,* and I was, like, "All this stuff has to go." I was fighting with them, and that's just one example out of, maybe, twenty. And they would have Chester telling kids to fuck off or something—
Sim: [laughing very hard throughout]
Matt: —and Chester wouldn't say fuck off to *anybody*. It was completely out of character and—you know—*they* don't know Chester. Everything became

a fight, and that became the hell of trying to collaborate with people in Hollywood, and in the end we ended up with their version of the script and my version of the script, both of which HBO passed on. I know that this is about the TV show instead of about the comic, but they're similar in the sense that you're using real people—but ultimately I think comics is a higher art form than television because you don't have to answer to anybody. But if you have an editor, it's like a producer, like at *New Yorker* magazine—you do have to answer to them. To me editors are interferers. If you're just showing your work to people whose opinions you respect and you're just soliciting opinions you know, that's just feedback. You respond to it as you will.

Sim: *Yeah, the thing was that that was so different from my own approach. I wouldn't show anything to anybody—you'll see it when it comes out on the stands and, of course, when I was talking to Chester, and I said, "Is this reciprocal with Seth?" And Chet said, "No way." I mean, it's just Seth's nature. He's not interested in outside opinions, but if you want him to give you an opinion, he'll give you an honest opinion.*

Matt: Chet and I have both criticized Seth after the fact. I remember we both had opinions about an ending of an issue of *Palookaville*, the last page or the last two pages. And he said, "Oh, yeah, I agree. But I'm going to fix all that in the collection." So—

Sim: *What about your own books? What about* The Poor Bastard?

Matt: I actually changed the ending on *The Poor Bastard* between the first and second printing. The last panel where—in the present printing—after my character strikes out with the girls, it ends with him in his room alone and, originally, in the first printing I had him eating spaghetti and popping in a video of *Angel Heart*, and in the second printing I had him popping in a porn video, and in the last panel I had him unraveling some toilet paper as he's sweating. So it's no longer as "cute". A friend of mine out here whose name is E—that's his name, just the letter—told me that he loved the old ending and that I ruined it by changing the ending. "It was great because it was so pathetic—like a child eating your spaghetti and watching this awful movie called *Angel Heart* with Lisa Bonet in it." But, to me, it was more pathetic to have me watching porn, and this was the direction my life was heading in anyway, into the future issues. Practically every time I see this guy, he argues that I should change it back.

Sim: *Is he persuading you?*

Matt: No! No he's not.

Sim: *Okay, because I did one of these talks with Craig Thompson, and he was saying that he changed some sequences in* Blankets, *but he still has the original versions that he did the first way, and I always thought in that situation you're really asking for posterity to judge you—somewhere up ahead when you're no longer here to defend it, there are going to be whole factions of people who are going to be saying, No, this was the right way to do it, or that was the right way to do it. So far, the guys who would be in my camp like Seth and Paul Pope and Frank Miller have the attitude of, "It's all just opinions, so I'm going to do it the way I think is right and sink or swim just on my own."*

"[U]ltimately I think comics is a higher art form than television because you don't have to answer to anybody."

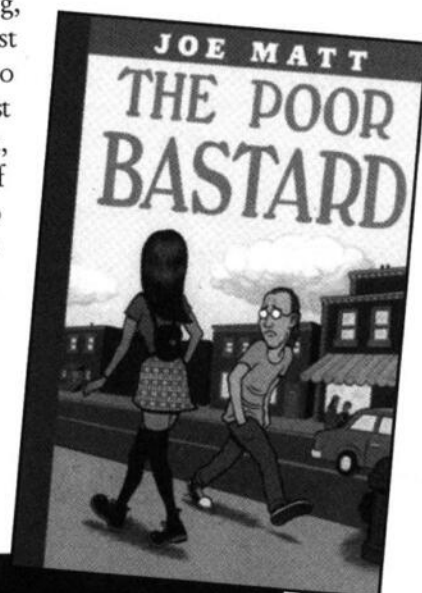
Matt: I've had Seth lecture me on this same subject, saying to me, "You better know what you're doing, because you can't expect anyone *else* to know what you're doing." And it's true. You can get to the point where you're flailing around, as if you're lost at sea. Everyone's going to have something different to say. Depending on who you go to, you're going to get a different suggestion.

Sim: *How many people did you show your work to?*

Matt: Just Chester and Seth. After that—I remember with the last issue, issue thirteen where Chester, Seth, and I are in the restaurant, after the three of us have talked in this restaurant for the whole issue—it ends with me wanting to order food, and I ask for a menu. I remember Peter [Birkemoe] from the Beguiling saying, "I don't like this last panel, it just ends so abruptly. You're just asking for a menu, and it feels as if there's supposed to be another page to this. It doesn't feel like an ending."

Sim: *I didn't have that impression at all.*

Matt: Yeah, but that was his opin-

ion, you know? And I listened to it and—I appreciated it. I'm looking for feedback, and then I thought about it, and I just discarded that suggestion. But if I really felt that he was right, I would have changed it. I remember—Chester probably told you about this original last panel he had in *I Never Liked You* where he had present-day Chester, forty-year-old Chester, he's just saying some kind of trite thing like, "That was the way it was, and I never saw her again." And it was completely jarring, with this gigantic jump into the future where we had never even seen the present-day Chester in the story before this. And Seth and I were both, like, "What is this? Some kind of joke?"

Sim: [laughs]

Matt: We didn't think he was serious, and he seemed immediately embarrassed, and he never, you know, speaks of it to this day. It's like it never happened. *[laughs]* But it *did* happen.

Sim: *I think, as long as you're still calling your own shots—as long as you remain the final judge of what you include and what you take out—*

Matt: Sure.

Sim: *—if someone can talk you out of an idea, well, that's fine, but it was your final decision, having listened to their argument and having your own point of view to say, "No, I think they're right in the long term."*

Matt: Yeah, I think that's crucial in the making of art—that ultimately you don't have to answer to anyone. And Chris Oliveiros has always been great. He's always been very hands-off. I think you can exert influence by saying "This was a great something-something," but when you suggest, "How about adding another twenty pages here to flesh it out—"

Sim: [teasing] *Except in your case, Joe, that's talking about adding another three or four years to a project.*

Matt: *[laughs]* Yeah, I know. But I have *Peep Shows* 11, 12, and 13, which will be the first half of a collection someday. You know Chris could very well suggest at some point to get a thin graphic novel in print: "Why don't we just do these three issues and try to wrap it up in the fourth issue?" And, in a sense, I did do that with *Fair Weather*—not by Chris's

"I have no momentum for working now....When you called, I was assembling a photo album."

suggestion but I did wrap it up in a way that I hadn't planned. I did kind of end it sooner than I thought I was going to.

Sim: *Any instinct tells you that you want to change that or—?*

Matt: No, not *Fair Weather.* No, I wasn't very satisfied with a lot of the things about it. I was anxious to move ahead and start with more present-day stuff. I just wanted to get to issue 11 and start writing about the "porn problem." Chester's collecting *Ed the Happy Clown* again—it'll be serialized as comic books first, and then it'll be a collection again, and he told me that he pencilled something like a hundred pages to continue it from where it ends, and he said that they were terrible, and he totally scrapped the whole idea. He said the new pages weren't improving the story; they were just dragging it out more.

Sim: *Right.*

Matt: You know, I would just *love to see those pages. It drives me crazy.*

Sim: [laughing] *Yeah!*

Matt: And if I saw them, I'd probably—you know, he's not soliciting my opinion, but if he did I'd probably—I mean I love everything he does. So, I can't be very objective. I can't be like—I'd rather have more than less, probably. But when you're a fan, that's how it is.

Sim: *Well, I'm the same way about both of your guys' work. I always just wish that there was more of it. I realize that just by your nature you anguish about your stuff far more than I did. But I agree with you. I'm willing to bet that if I read the next hundred pages that he was doing on* Ed the Happy Clown, *that I would be going, 'Well, this is really great.' There might be ten or fifteen pages that I might think he should lose or do differently, but to me it's always better to just keep forging ahead.*

Matt: On that same subject, just this past January 1st, I resolved to do a daily comic strip—a la James Kochalka—to just draw four panels a day and just see where it goes and let it accumulate, and at least I would have another collection of some sort some day. So I did this for about a week—just like Kochalka—it was just a four-panel strip taking a moment in my day and they just seemed lame and trite. I abandoned the project after a week because there seemed to be no point to it. Every one of them was just a dumb gag.

Sim: *Well, I think that's one of the tough things that you guys always have faced with the kind of autobiography that you're doing which is so—I mean, you want it, on the one hand, to be true to life—*

Matt: Yeah.

Sim: *—authentic, not fabricated. But the odds are that the truer something is to life, most of the time it is going to be trite.*

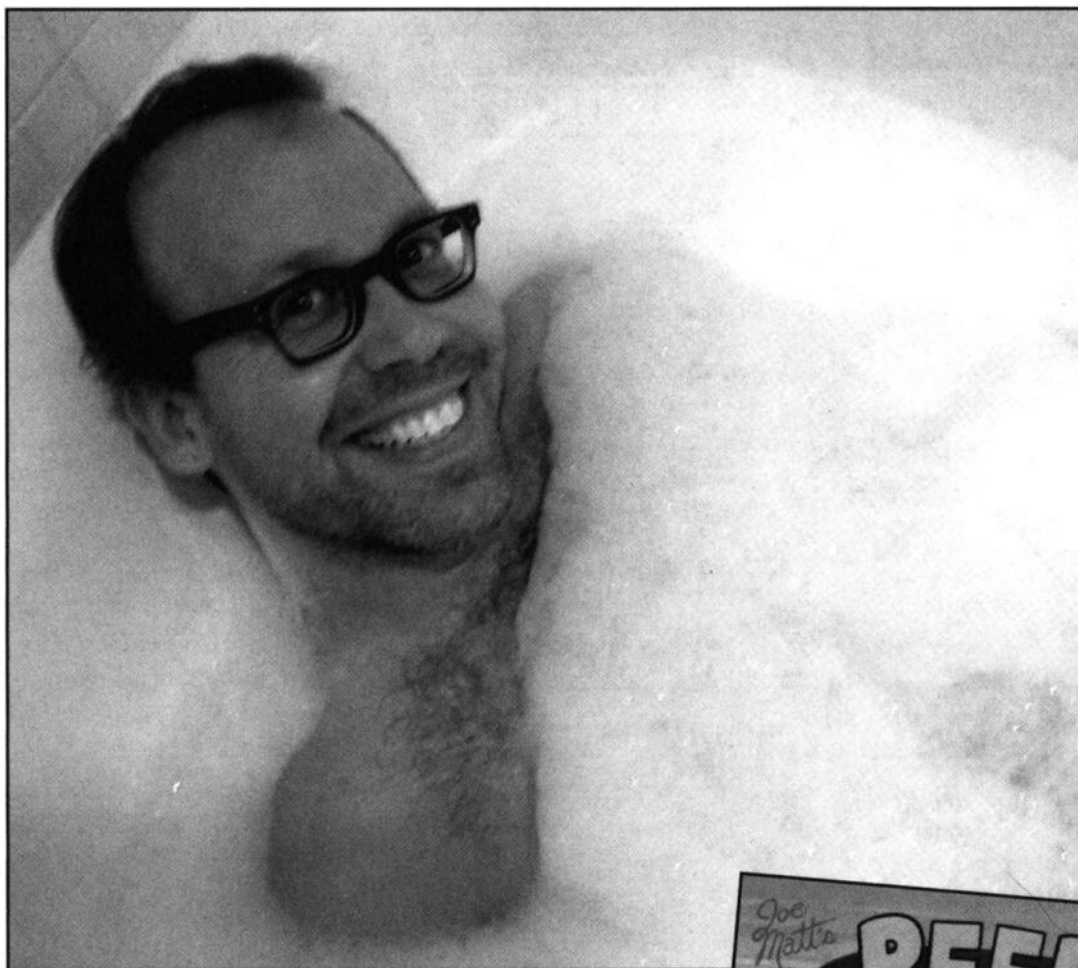
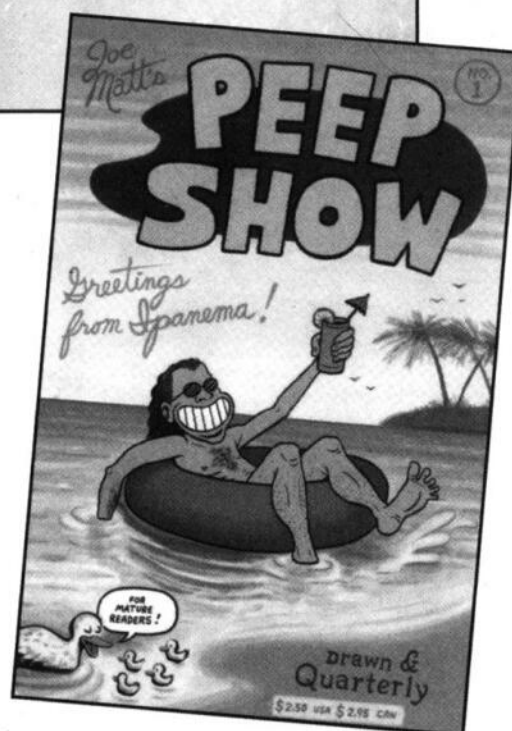
Matt: Yeah, but more than true to life, I think that what you want is an "engaging read," and these daily strips would just end with me whining, "I wanna watch porn!"

Sim: [laughs]

Matt: And it really played up the "caricature-ness" of my character. I think that's why *Peanuts* worked so well for four panels, because the characters are clearly defined, and they have limited characteristics.

Sim: *But there's a lot of his stuff that he hated, too. There's no way that we would have* The Complete Peanuts *being published if Charles Schulz were still alive.*

Matt: No.

Sim: *And doesn't that tell you something?*

Matt: It does. But, again, as I said, when you're a fan *[Sim laughs]* you want all of it. And as a fan I would argue for Chester to add all those issues of *Yummy Fur* that he did continue *Ed the Happy Clown* in, where that woman takes Ed home and the children—
Sim: *Right.*
Matt: —and a dog bites his head. You know? I want it all. And Chet's saying *[laughing]*, "It's *pointless!*" *[Sim laughs]* And he ends it ambiguously, where they're just driving in that car. And I'm like *[laughing]*, "No, I can't *stand* that ending. I want to see what happens to him when he gets back to their house." The minute I met Chester, I was always so frustrated, saying, like, "How did President Reagan's head get on Ed's penis?" *[Sim laughs]* "You never actually show how it gets on there or explain it." And he just laughed. "You don't need to know that." And I was, like—
Sim: [imitating Joe's whiny voice] *"I DO!"*
Matt: *[the real article]* "I *DO!*"
Sim: [trying to get him back on topic] *The thing is, I think what you have to do is to develop that sort of fan sense about your own work.*
Matt: Yeah [then, realizing I've nailed him—*Joe indicated in his corrections that he wanted me to delete this observation. Duly noted*] Well—
Sim: [not letting him off the hook] *You've got to be able to look at your own work and say, "Win, lose, or draw, it's more pages of* Peep Show*" and for the people who buy* Peep Show, *that's what they want. I mean, let's face it, Joe,*

you've pushed more boundaries in terms of bad taste and monomaniacal themes and literally entire issues where nothing happens relative to what people think of as "things happening in comic books"—you've still got your core audience out here, and we're all the same: "Another Peepshow? *Yeah, gotta read it, right away."*
Matt: Well, thank you, but—um—*[wriggling off the hook]*. Yeah, I mean, I certainly—I haven't had a new issue out in, it might be coming up on four years now. But, as bad as I feel about that, I know that I would feel worse if I just cranked out sub-par issues. It's like, when I look at the later issues of *Hate* where Peter Bagge had Jim Blanchard inking them or colouring them or something—

Joe pops up as one of the kids in Latter Days.

Sim: *Inking them.*

Matt: —and they really had that "cranked out" quality, and I didn't want to approach my work like that, and that has its drawbacks too, because *[laughs]* I have no momentum for working now. I never sit down and do anything. When you called, I was assembling a photo album. Which is satisfying too, but—

Sim: [getting him back on the hook] *—but not to your fan base.*

Matt: *[laughing]*—but not to my fan base. But, at least I don't feel bad because I've put out some really crappy issues. And part of what's paralyzing me or what has been paralyzing me is that feeling that I don't want to make any missteps. I don't really know where the collection that I'm working on is going. And I can't ask anyone to tell me. You can't ask people to do your work for you.

Sim: *It's your story, it's your book—*

Matt: Yeah. And by now I have such a backlog of experiences, so many things have happened in the last ten years that haven't been put in the comic, and it's up to me to pick and choose what's going in there.

Sim: [off the hook again] *Right.*

Matt: The thing that I've successfully fought with the last three issues is that I don't want this soap-opera-like quality to dominate the book. I want an anti-story. I don't really want anything to be happening. I just want to examine the situation, and yet I have to somehow have a satisfying conclusion or ending, whereas *[laughs]* there is none. There's never really a satisfying ending in real life. So, I've been very lost in the sense of "where to go next?" Hence, my non-productivity.

Sim: *Well, the* Comics Journal *did their article—it's gotta be two, three years ago now—called, "Whatever happened to Joe Matt?" So I appreciate you doing this interview so we finally have an answer to that, anyway.* [Matt laughs] *It's not going to be in the* Comics Journal, *but they can always tune in to* Following Cerebus *to find out Whatever happened to Joe Matt?*

Matt: *[laughs]* I'll be back. I just talked to Seth the other day, and he was very encouraging. He was saying he hadn't given up on me yet. He knows I'll have another issue out eventually and a collection someday. But Chris Oliveiros *[laughs]*—

Sim: [laughing] *Chris has given up on you.*

Matt: But he's still said that he'll publish anything I do.

Sim: [duh] *Well, sure. He'll check outside to see if there're two blue moons in the sky if something comes in, but he'll publish it.*

Matt: I've been in Hollywood for two years—chasing that Hollywood money and trying to work with other people, and then once you go to the networks, *they* suggest changes. We worked on a script that was more faithful to the Frankie storyline, and after working on that thing for a month and arguing with my co-writers, HBO finally said, "It's okay, but we'd rather that you write about Andy and Kim instead." So we had to rewrite the whole thing and bring in Andy and Kim and use that as the premise. *[trademark whiny Joe Matt voice]* And it just *sucked.* And my point is that after getting completely jaded on chasing the Hollywood money, I am anxious to get back to work on my comic.

Sim: *Well, that's good. We're all anxious to read the next one. Well, you have a good night, Joe, and congratulations again on your forthcoming nuptials.*

Matt: Turn the thing off. Turn the tape off.

Sim: *Okay. Uh, what's the date?*

Matt: Today's date?

Sim: *No, no, no. The date of the wedding.*

Matt: Oh. Uh. I have no idea. *[laughs]*

Sim: *Okay, now I'll shut the tape off.*

Andy Runton Interview

The third volume of Andy Runton's Owly *graphic novels is due any time now. Dave Sim spoke with Runton by phone on March 2. Dave did the transcription; Dave, Andy, and Craig Miller edited the text.*

Sim: *Let's start back at the beginning with* Owly, the Way Home. *I assume you were pretty much unpublished up to that point. So did you solicit feedback at the various stages while you were producing it?*

Runton: What had happened with that was that I had met Chris [Staros, Top Shelf Publisher] and Rob Venditti who works with him at a few of the shows, and I was local, so we had been talking. I didn't really have a lot of confidence in what I was doing. I didn't really consider myself a writer; I was more of an artist. They liked what I was doing with the stories, and they were encouraging me to do longer and longer stories so that (a) I could make a living at writing and drawing graphic novels, and (b) to get better at this. What I did was I showed *The Way Home*—or the story that would eventually *become The Way Home*—to Rob and Chris in a very loose format. Having gone to school to be a designer, when you're showing stuff to clients, it's more of a "showing of concepts" where you try to involve them in the process. So, that's what I did. I wanted to get their early feedback because, in the design business, the earlier you get feedback, the better, because that's the less work you have to do.

Sim: *What were the longest works they had seen of yours when they were encouraging you to do something longer?*

Runton: Seven pages long *[laughs].* So I jumped from seven pages to fifty-four pages in terms of length. So, I really didn't know what I was doing in terms of storytelling. I showed Rob the *beginnings* of something, and I had an *idea* of what I wanted to say, and I showed them really, really loose sketches, and it just kind of developed from there.

Sim: *Do you think you were inclined in that direction yourself already, or was it a matter that when they explained to you, you realized, "Yeah, this is the game I'm in now"?*

Runton: Well, this is it. I was really fed up with design, and I wanted to make this work for a living—I wanted to be able to draw cartoons for a living and was asking them, "Okay, what do I need to do to make that happen?" I think I was inclined to do it, and they told me exactly what I wanted to hear. So it just kind of all fit.

Sim: *Had you shown the early rough version of* The Way Home *to anybody else?*

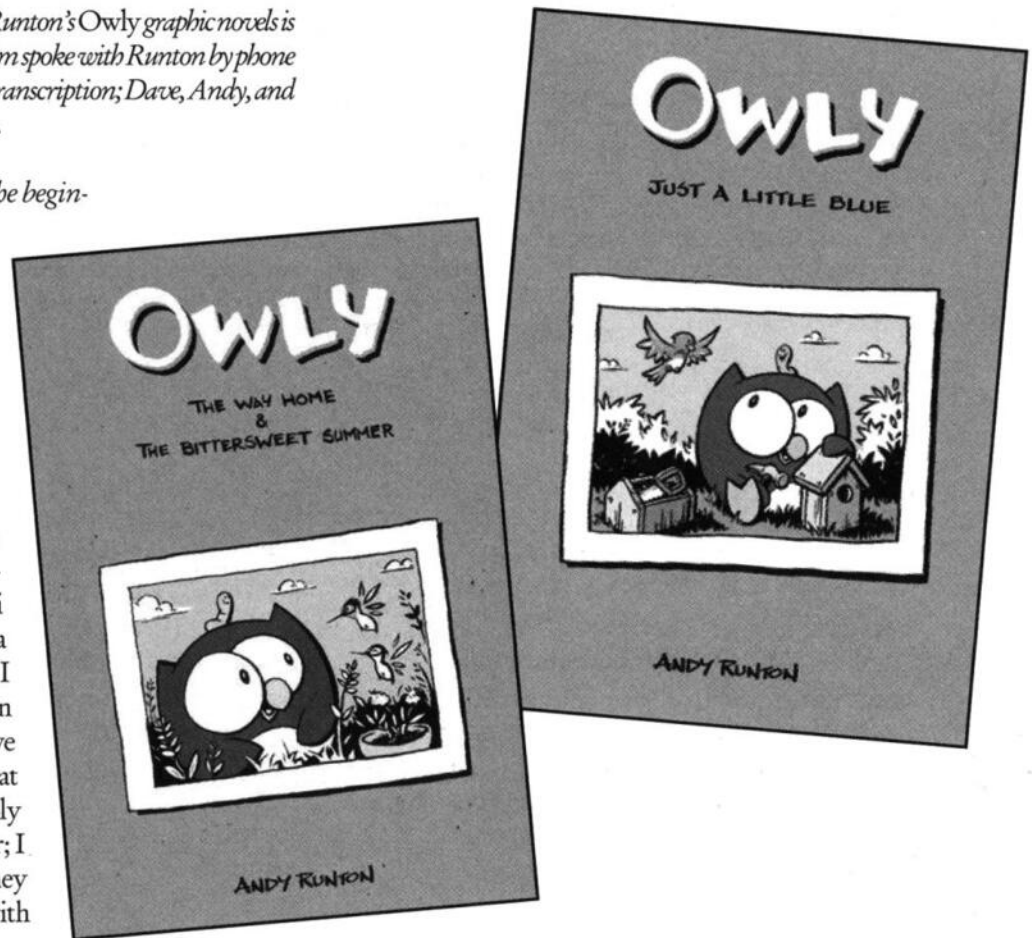
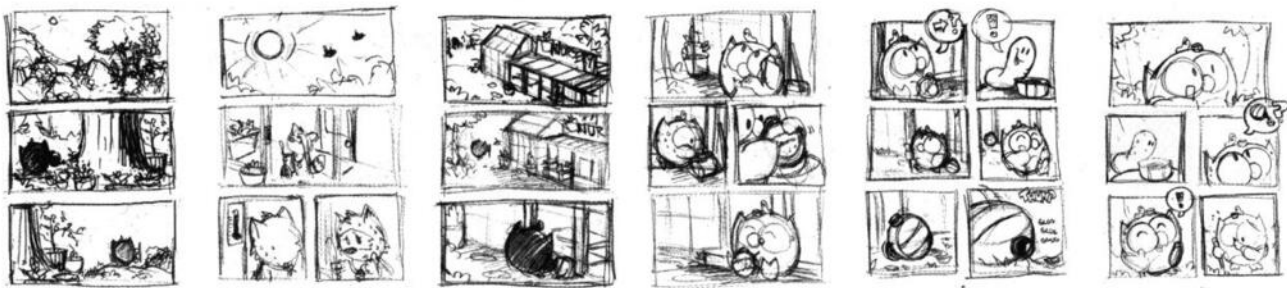
Runton: My mom. Without her *Owly* wouldn't exist. We would go on these walks and just talk about these little stories. So, she knew what I was trying to say but, again, she's not a writer either, so we were just kind of stumbling in the dark as to how we wanted to do this.

Sim: *What's your mother's name? We can credit her in the article.*

Runton: Patty. Patty Runton.

Sim: *So, at what point were you talking to her about the story—before you were talking to Chris and Rob or while you were talking to Chris and Rob.*

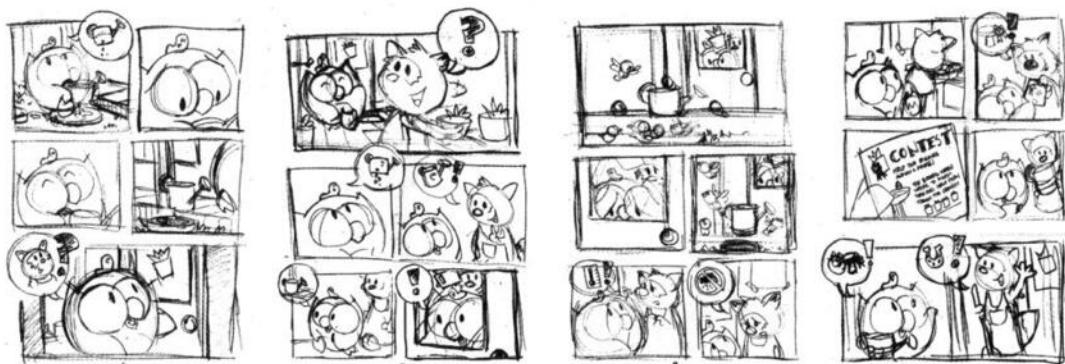
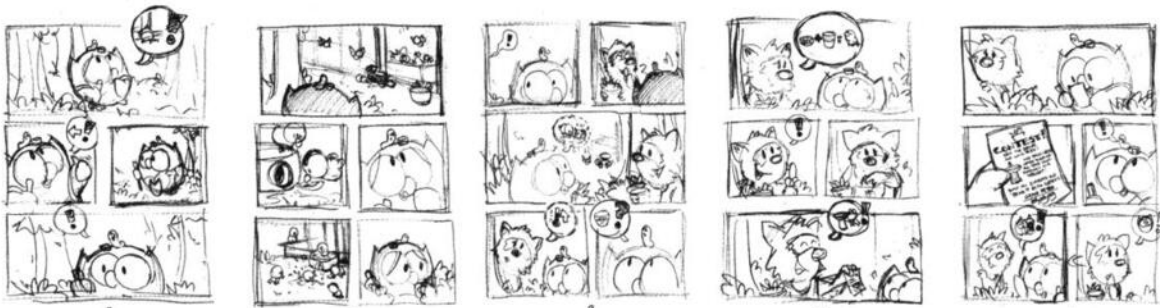
Runton: She's been involved since the very beginning. The part in *The Way Home,* rescuing the little worm in the little puddle. That's something that happened when we were going on our walks. It would be raining, and the worms would be in the streets, and as soon as the sun would come out, they'd dry up and die, so we'd shuffle them over and put them back in the grass. So she was intimately familiar with what it was that I was trying to say.

Sim: *So she was definitely aware that you were soliciting ideas for a comic-book story?*

Runton on sequence above and top right of facing page: "This is the thumbnail version of the first attempt at the beginning sequence to Owly: Splashin' Around (Free Comic Day Book). There were a few things I needed to establish in this sequence. I had to show that it was hot and Owly needed to see all of the birds playing in a puddle at the Nursery. Now, where that water came from was the issue. Chris rightly suggested that the beginning was too complicated, plus I used up 11 pages to get here. It was an important sequence and it really needed to flow, so I tried again."

Runton: I guess I wasn't really thinking of it in exactly those *terms.* We were just trying to think of ways to tell stories about this little owl, and it just kind of all came together. We would ask each other questions like, "How would Owly react in a situation like this?" In terms of the actual flow of the story and page layouts and stuff like that—those were the things that Chris and Rob really helped me out with. I didn't really understand page-to-page transitions—how much time should elapse in the space of time it takes the reader to turn the page, those kinds of things—so they would make little suggestions along those lines, and then I'd read other comics and notice things that I had never noticed before in terms of structure and storytelling technique, and I would adjust my own work accordingly.

Sim: *On the panel that led to all this, Chester Brown asked Will Eisner point blank if there were instances with Dave Schreiner at Kitchen Sink where Will would say, "Mm, I see what you're saying, but I disagree, and I think we're going to do it my way instead." And the impression that I got was that Will wasn't that way. Because Dave Schreiner was his editor, he took it as a given that if Dave pointed out something that he thought didn't work, that that was the case, and he would try something else. In your own situation, were there instances with Chris and Rob where you would say, "I see what you're saying, but I don't agree with that"?*

Runton: That definitely happened. The original story that I proposed, the pacing was really slow—it was originally going to be a hundred-and-twenty-page story. I had this very long intro, and Chris and Rob's reaction was, "It works, but—." What's missing here? What's going on over here? My reaction was to read into their reactions. If they were asking me about something that they thought wasn't clear, I wouldn't necessarily fix the area of the story they were specifically pointing to, but I might change something earlier in the story so that the question didn't come up later on. So the specific scene might stay the way it was, but I might change other things leading up to it to address the concerns about what was going on.

Runton on sequence above and below: "This time the water comes from a watering can, not Owly's canteen. This solved a few problems, shaved 2 pages off so I could spend longer with the contest at the end and gave Owly and Wormy a real reason to visit the nursery and Mrs. Raccoon."

Sim: *Do you worry about people—when this article appears—advocating for* Owly the Way Home: The Director's Cut?

Runton: *[laughs]* Yeah, I mean I've got the old sketches from the original version. It was just one of those things where the story was always there in a very loose form, but the real key that I got from talking to them was that these animals really *are* afraid of Owly, and that really is the key piece of the story. In the story as I had it originally, owly had already made all these little friends along the way, so they would ask a little fish for directions, and originally the lightning bugs were Owly's friends so, originally they weren't as afraid of him. That piece was missing, and that's a critical piece of the story, and that all came together because of Chris and Rob. They understood what I wanted to say, "Here's the character who wants to connect with all of these animals, but in the end they're afraid of him." If I could portray that properly, it would just really make the story sing.

Sim: *I guess the last question would be, "You're working on a new Owly graphic novel?"*

Runton: Actually the new one is on the presses right now, and it'll be out in a week and a half probably.

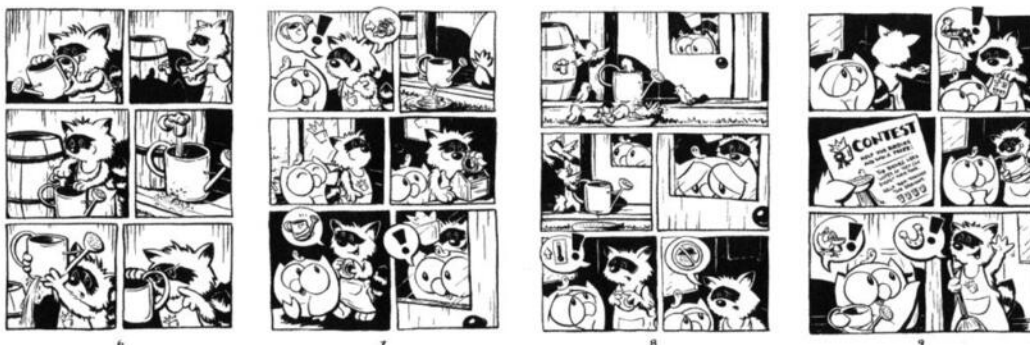
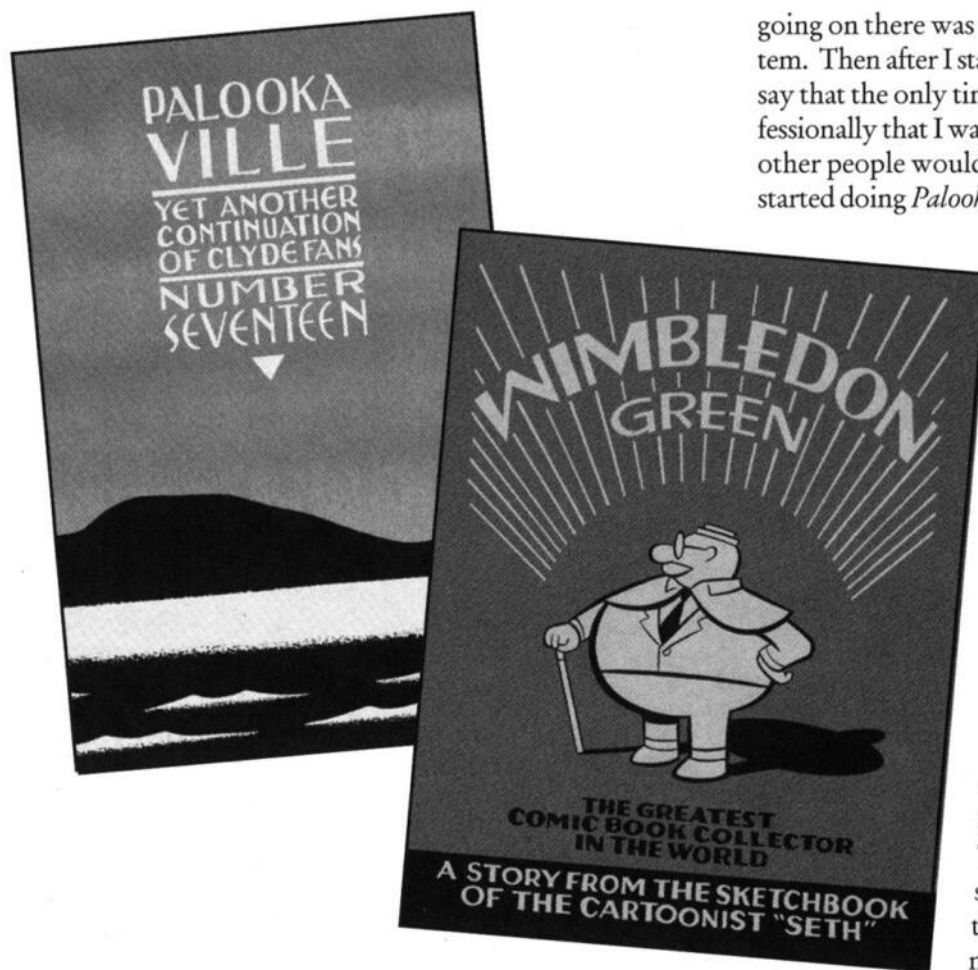
Sim: *Great. And you're working on one after that, now?*

Runton: That one's in the process right now. *Owly Just a Little Blue* is finished and done, and then the one I'm working on right now, *Owly Flying Lessons,* should be out in time for SPX (the Small Press Expo in Bethesda, Maryland) this year.

Sim: *Are you soliciting as much input on those, or do you think you're starting to find your way on your own?*

Runton: Well, with *Owly Just a Little Blue,* that one came together a lot slower. I actually wrote a lot of it last year while we were going to the conventions and things like that and what happened was, Chris was asking me about it, and I had some good ideas, but I made a mistake, just misjudging what Owly would do. And when I explained it to Chris, he said he just didn't really see how the story would work that way, so I had to go back through and really try to examine what I was trying to say. So there was an initial pitch, and then a certain amount of questioning, and I went back and really rewrote the entire thing in my mind and scripted the whole thing out, and there were just a few little tweaks on the final script. That one's a hundred and twenty page story.

continued on page 12

Runton on sequence above and below: "This is the final version of the sequence. Chris found a logic hole in the previous version: how did the watering can not leak out completely by the time Owly got to the nursery? So I changed pages 5, 6, and 7 to address that. I was really happy with the end result. It didn't require any logic leaps and simply worked better."

Seth Interview

Seth first turned heads in the mid-eighties with his art on Mr. X. *More recent work includes* Palookaville *and* Clyde Fans. *He also has the distinction of being a character (an artist, of course) in the* Cerebus *storyline. Dave Sim interviewed Seth on April 21. Dave did the transcription; Dave, Seth, and Craig Miller edited the text.*

Sim: *I guess the first question that I have is—since we already have the Chester and Joe interviews pointing out that you're not a great one for input creatively—was that always the case? Was there ever a time when you asked other people for advice on your work?*

Seth: Umm. Yeah, I would say when I was first starting out, a couple of times, I guess. Before I was working on *Mr. X,* I was trying to work up some comic books of my own at that point, and I had just come through a period when I had really stopped working entirely. To put this in context, this would be after I went to art school—then after I dropped out—I decided to try and do some comics. And around this time I met up with an old girlfriend of mine—actually the woman who later married Bill Marks of all people—and she was interested in comics, and I started meeting up with her and showing her my stuff: mostly for encouragement, really. She was someone who was giving me a lot of positive feedback, which I really needed at the time. Not much criticism—she was trying to do her own comics at the time, so I'd say what was going on there was actually a mutual support system. Then after I started on *Mr. X,* I would have to say that the only time since I started working professionally that I was involved in showing work to other people would be with Chester, when I first started doing *Palookaville,* and he was working on *Yummy Fur,* and a little bit when Joe came along, too. But even at that point, I wasn't looking for feedback as much as for reassurance. Because I pretty much always felt this desire to stand or fall by what I did myself. And to some degree I've always resented getting comments, even if they make the work better.

Sim: *Let's double back a minute to* Mr. X. *You were doing that for Bill Marks at the time. Did he have much input, or did you just turn the work in?*

Seth: There wasn't much input. The place was so unprofessional. They basically gave me the book—a person who had never done any professional work—and Dean Motter [the creator and designer of the character] was really not involved enough to be critiquing anything. He gave me a couple of pieces of compositional advice that I think of to this day—things like varying the head sizes on the page and watching out for odd shapes in your composition and stuff like that. But generally I was sort of left to my own devices. One of the things that galled me was that they wouldn't let me do the cover, and there was this kind of implied criticism that I wasn't up to the standard of doing the cover. That seemed to me like the perfect scenario for deflating whatever feeling of self-worth you might have.

Sim: *It was like a vote of non-confidence.*

Seth: So there never were any specific criticisms addressed towards me, but there was a feeling of judgment going on there. It wasn't like an apprenticeship system where I was being taught anything. An apprenticeship system by myself, because that was where I learned by seeing the work in print, but that's really all it was, an opportunity to figure things out on my own.

Sim: *Okay, let's skip back to where we left off before then.*

Seth: To Chester and Joe, you mean?

Sim: *Yeah. So, there was a time when you were showing* Palookaville *to both Chet and Joe?*

Seth: Certainly I showed the first issue to Chester. All the way up to issue—*[pause]* I'm not sure at what

point I stopped showing the book to them. I'm not even really sure when Joe came into the equation. I probably showed the first four or five issues to Chester prior to publication. And I can't really remember any actual criticism that Chester gave me. Certainly there were instances where I could read his reaction. He was generally always pretty positive. I think he recognized—as anybody does—that when you put that in their hands, it's kind of a vulnerable position. You just spent months working on this thing, and the last thing you need is to sense someone's disappointment. I didn't really come to any understanding about how to change my work, but I did come to understand how to see the work from the outside a little more clearly. The whole process of creating a comic book, as far as I'm concerned, is like being lost in a dream world while you're working on it: a dream world that fluctuates between "I'm a genius" and "This is a piece of crap." So putting it in someone else's hands and watching them read it was an enlightening experience: by watching their reactions to things.

Sim: *But there did come a point where you cut that off.*

Seth: Yeah. I think at some point I just felt uncomfortable with the process, because I just felt like I had already committed myself to the book in a finished state when I put it in their hands. So to place it in their hands and then sense that they weren't very thrilled with it—I wasn't really going to say, "What can I do to fix it?" All it was doing was setting up sort of an emotional disappointment for me, putting it in someone's hands and *expecting* a reaction of some kind. And I just wanted to remove that whole element from it, to stand or fall by the finished product and put it out there. If it was any good, I just wanted it to be good as a result of my own decisions.

Sim: *Yeah. My assessment was always, "It's still just another opinion."*

Seth: Exactly.

Sim: *I mean if you have an audience of three thousand or six thousand or however many people you've got, there's going to be such a spectrum of reactions anyway that it might as well be, as you say, "This is my hill to die on" if I'm making a wrong choice or I'm making an unpopular choice.*

Seth: Exactly. I would say that the only time it has not been true was recently when Chester made some criticisms to me after publication that I took to heart.

Sim: *That would be the issue—didn't Joe see that one as well—?*

Seth: I'll tell you which one I'm thinking of, and we'll see if it matches up with what you're thinking. The end of Part Two of *Clyde Fans,* the sequence where the character Simon is walking along out of the town, and there are memory flashes of the people he's been talking to. Now, after the book came out, I didn't show it to Chester, but after it came out he was talking to me about it and saying that he felt that whole sequence was really like hitting people over the head with a hammer. He felt there was no need to repeat these lines [of dialogue] again. My first reaction was, Well, I don't know if I agree with you on that, because I chose the other direction. But as I thought about it, over time I thought it did seem kind of "un-subtle" to me. And I think what bothered me about the comment and the reason that it stuck in my brain is that I did think that it had fallen into the category of a kind of cliché. And if there's one thing I hate, it's to feel that I'm regurgitating some clichéd technique that I've picked up through too much viewing of other work—like pop culture crap—and the more I thought about it, the more it really struck me that that was the case with the "voice over" experience of the character revisiting these traumas from earlier in the story. So I did give it some serious thought, and when I republished it in the book form, I reworked that sequence and actually removed the dialogue and added in a couple of pages and just turned it into a couple of mental flashes of a couple of the characters he had been talking to.

Sim: *It seems to me that that's very much an* avant garde *kind of problem. It's almost—from the stories that Chet and Joe were telling me—that's really what you guys are watching out for in each other's work: the "trite" and the "cliché."*

Seth: That's probably true.

Sim: *That seemed to be the situation with the final panel that Chet originally had on* I Never Liked You, *with the sudden jump forward to him forty years old—*

Seth: Yeah.

Sim: *— "and I never saw her again." And Joe said you and Joe both reacted, "Is this some sort of joke?"*

Seth: *[laughs]* Yeah, I remember that. It's funny. I have a hard time remembering the actual panel itself. I can kind of vaguely visualize it, but I just remember the sensation of reading it, and it sticking out like a sore thumb.

Sim: *I asked Chet if we could run that panel, and he said, "No way."*

Seth: *[laughing]* I'm not surprised. The biggest embarrassment as an artist is when you produce something that you think is earnest, and to have it seen by others as representing some kind of cliché. Because you can't help but see it on some level as—well, it's not even really a criticism so much as a realization of personal failure that you're stupider than you thought you were.

"The whole process of creating a comic book...is like being lost in a dream world."

Sim: *Well, I think it's also because comic books are so much more—condensed—and so labour intensive, that it's not like a half-hour television show or something. "It's trite and cliché"—well, so what? It's just there to sell soap.*

Seth: Exactly.

Sim: *Whereas if you're putting months of time into your book and years of time into the overall collected version, the last thing you want it to be is the same thing that you can get*

just by switching on the television.

Seth: It's what you're setting out to try and avoid by trying to do something honest, and that's really the hardest thing, especially when you're working in a medium that was composed of clichés from the beginning to some degree. You're trying to get away from that, but you know that somewhere inside you is the thousands and thousands of super-hero comic books you've read—

Sim: [laughs]

Seth: —and you don't want to be regurgitating that stuff, but that is the language that you're working from, so it makes it, I think, especially disappointing when you've failed to tap into something Real and instead just regurgitated something else that you weren't planning on regurgitating. In the first issue of *Palookaville,* I had one panel where there's a punch thrown, and it was a very difficult panel for me to draw, because I only knew how to draw someone throwing a punch from having read millions of comic books. I had never given any consideration in real life to what it was like to throw a punch, so it was very difficult to draw that. And even with that in mind, I don't think I gave it enough thought. I look back on that now, and I still think that falls too closely into "what a comic book punch looks like."

Sim: *Yeah.* [pause] *Well, it is "a punch inside a comic book—"*

Seth: *[laughs]*

Sim: *—so it is kind of difficult to step outside of that construct. One of the things that I did think was interesting was when Joe was talking about his recent experiment with trying to do the James Kochalka thing of "four panels a day." And he said he gave up after a week, because it was just pointless. And I said to him that I thought that one of the problems that you've got on the* avant garde *side is that you're trying to be so Authentic, so True to Life, and a lot of times life is very trite—*

Seth: Oh, absolutely.

Sim: *—life is very clichéd. So you're always on that borderline between documenting life accurately and possibly just ending up with a very trite observation at the end of the day and coming up with something genuinely new, something that does cut to the core of human experience.*

Seth: I think it's really difficult *to* do that. In any medium it's difficult to do that, but certainly in comics it is because you're dealing with, as you say, a lot of condensing of material—you're dealing with "condensed reality." And so to try to recreate the multi-levelled experience of being alive by sitting in your basement drawing a comic book—it's an extremely complicated process. And certainly, trying to boil it down to a four-panel epiphany every day is a process that I really can't imagine trying to engage with for more than a couple of days myself. I think Kochalka is a perfect example of someone who has, like, bled the life out of any attempt at reality by creating this really fake approach to reality, by trying to make everything into a "cute" moment. It's funny that from the outside fringes of the so-called *avant garde,* he's approaching life without much more complexity than a "Love is..." cartoon.

A "comic book punch" in Palookaville

Sim: *I also think that there's the problem of influence. You can see that guys like Chris Ware and Dan Clowes must be really trying to avoid turning into each other—*

Seth: Oh, yeah.

Sim: *—at this point. It is, you know, The Quiet Moment, and it is The Drawn-Out Moment in the overall scope of human experience. But you end up having a lot the same problem. There are guys drawing comic books who have obviously read "way-too-much-*Eightball,*" and that's how they see life—through Dan Clowes' eyes.*

Seth: True. However, I think it's true that of all the artists I know, Chris is the one person that I have the most faith in approaching it honestly, because I think from the outside, people may look at what Chris is doing and see a certain kind of "system" in how he's working, but he's really one of the few artists I know who approaches each attempt at the board with such a strong, self-motivated sense of analysis on why he's making any decision on the page, which I would say is kind of unusual among comic artists. Certainly there's a lot of innovation that's gone on, and a lot of people have made really remarkable choices in how they choose to tell the story, but people tend to have—like myself: I have an approach when I come to the work. I sort of know what I *want* to do and how I'm going to *attempt* to get at a story. And I have a way of going at it. And I'd say that that's certainly true for Chester and several other people I could name. But Chris, I think, more than anyone is trying to reinvent the wheel every time. I'm not sure that he—I mean, you can't reinvent the wheel every time. Like any artist you're going to recognize that it is a Chris Ware piece. You can't start fresh every time. But, he's got the right attitude. I think in any medium as stylized as comics, you can easily get locked into a system. And I'm certainly aware of it in my own work.

Sim: *Well, and you also end up "raising the bar" on yourself—*

Seth: Yeah.

Sim: *—if you have reinvented the wheel every time—just*

the variety of formats that he tackled and the different themes and the different approaches. I had the same sort of experience with Cerebus*—always trying to do innovative layouts and finding new ways to compose the page—and then people start expecting that. And if you just give them "a page," then they're disappointed.*

Seth: When you were working on it, did you feel a pressure to always try and innovate? Or could you say, I'm just going to work with a basic grid because that's what I feel happy with at the moment?

Sim: *Actually, the best example of that was* Jaka's Story, *where I just went with the strict two-tier-three-vertical-panels-in-each-tier for most of the book. That was pretty much the standard, the template for the entire book. And up to that point Alex Toth had been a big fan of my work, and he sent me a postcard basically saying how disappointed he was that there was just this "picket fence" format—*

Seth: *[laughs]* Oh, really.

Sim: [laughs] *—and I thought, Well, this is the make-or-break part. You don't fold like an accordion because Alex Toth told you that.*

Seth: Yeah, exactly.

Sim: *You say, Well, this is how I see* Jaka's Story. *This is how I see doing the most understated story that I've done—this basic domestic drama sort of story—I don't want to have weird and bizarre "turn the page inside out" sorts of layouts.*

Seth: You know, I've never really looked at much Toth material, and I've never really thought about his panels arrangements—I'm so interested in the compositions within the panels themselves—but if you were to ask me before we had this conversation about the panel arrangements he used, I would've said that it was a pretty straightforward grid pattern.

Sim: [not having considered that] *Well, it was. But then he got very innovative later on with his Warren material.*

Seth: Oh, okay.

Sim: *I think the situation with that might've been—because he was getting* Cerebus *for free in the mail—he was looking at it and going "Jeez, that's interesting" or "Wow, that's a great way to do that, to communicate that," and again I might have set up an unrealistic expectation for someone like Toth who was, at that point in his career, absorbed by the concept of making each page into a tricky compositional entity as he did with, like, the "Daddy and the Pi" series that he drew for Warren, and suddenly it was as if I'd taken his compositional candy—the only thing that actually interested him about* Cerebus*—away.*

I guess the concluding question would be: How comfortable are you critiquing somebody else's work if you've arrived at that point where you think—I mean do you think that critiquing is an intrinsically unhealthy thing and that Chester, as an example, would be better just getting everything out of himself? Or do you think it varies from person to person?

Seth: I guess my answer would be "Whatever makes you comfortable is fine with me." But, from my personal point of view, I prefer the idea of an artist struggling to learn on his own and figure it out on his own, rather than, you know, being part of a gang that's supplementing each other's work with critique. I guess that's just because my own inclination is, I'm attracted to the image of the artist working alone and producing this complete work. For example, I don't know how anyone can stand to work with an editor. I don't really know how fiction writers have become used to that idea. I can understand working with a *proof-reader: that* makes sense to me. But even working as a prose writer, if there was someone changing around all the sentences in an article I had written and as a result of that it turned out to be a better-written article, I'd have to conclude at the end that I really wasn't much of a writer.

Sim: *Yeah.*

Seth: You could maybe say that you were a good "idea man" or something, but if I can't craft it myself given the skill required, I guess it would be like having an inker, basically—which is another situation I've always disliked: the idea of working with other artists. I guess an actual collaboration is a different story, but I've never been much *for* collaboration. I could imagine saying: I'm going to write this, and you draw it. But I would still want to have defined roles. I wouldn't want to have someone drawing it while I'm looking over his shoulder.

Sim: *Yeah, Gerhard and I always kept the work as separate as possible. To whatever extent it was possible I'd say, Draw whatever you want behind there. If there were something specific—something the picture specifically needed to be—*

Seth: Did you ever critique the actual drawing?

Sim: *Uh, no. He was so hard on himself all the time that finally I had to say with about a year to go on the book, "Look, if I see anything in your work that needs, you know, some extra lines, or if I think, 'if I white this part out here, I think it'll end up being a better picture,' I'll go ahead and*

"[I]n comics...you're dealing with 'condensed reality.'"

do that if you're all right with that." That seemed to help. He was more than "all right" with that—he found it reassuring, in the same way that I think Chester finds it reassuring that he knows you'll give him an honest assessment of what you think of his work. And, of course, that was a joy to me, you know. Because it's like someone is letting you put in the last three pieces of their jigsaw puzzle.

Seth: Yeah. I can certainly understand a level of self-doubt that would cause you to appreciate having someone there who can actually give you the reassurance you need by taking control. It would be nice—at the last minute—to have somebody who you respect saying, "Here are the right decisions." I'm always surprised that there are artists who have the ability to accept that with a limited amount of ego.

Sim: *Yeah.*

Seth: I'm just not one of them *[Sim laughs].*

Sim: *One of the things that Peter Birkemoe brought up on the panel is the situation of people bringing up artwork at conventions to be critiqued—*

Seth: Yeah.

Sim: *—which does put you in an "editor category." They're coming to you to get help taking the next step, and I have found that I'm not interested in other peoples' opinions on my work, but I'm perfectly happy to give someone else an opinion.*

Seth: Oh, I have no *shortage* of opinions *[Sim laughs]*. The problem is I find—it's tricky. I really think that the whole portfolio review situation is one that's fraught with problems. First, no one is actually there for criticism. Everyone is there for positive feedback. So, you are generally dealing with people who are looking for reassurance, which is fine if you want to go to one of these things and present yourself as an emotional support system for these people. If they really wanted honest criticism, I would probably feel more comfortable with it, but in that situation, what is actually happening is that you are dealing with someone's fragile ego, and I find that really uncomfortable. Even if I were there to give an honest criticism, I would probably start with the positives. But, when you feel that people aren't there for actual criticism, you can't really move on to much of the honest criticism beyond telling them something vaguely encouraging. There are times when you see people's artwork where you feel like to help them in any way you would really have to be brutal. And I just feel that nobody's there actually asking for that.

Sim: *Well, I always tell them at the same time that if they were bringing up the artwork that I was doing at the time that I was seventeen when I dropped out of high school to draw comic books, I'd say, "Don't be crazy. Go back to school—you don't draw well enough."*

Seth: Yeah, if I saw my own artwork presented to me that I was drawing at the age of twenty, I'd just think, "Oh, this poor fool." *[Sim laughs]* So you really can't tell who's going to be any good. And at the age of twenty I really wouldn't have been ready for that kind of harsh criticism either.

Sim: *Yeah, I mean there is the danger that you're just going to discourage them so dramatically that they'll give up, or there's also the danger that you're going to change their decision-making—they'd make a really good Seth, but they'd make a lousy Dave Sim.*

"[O]ne of the secrets of criticism is that it has to come from a source where you actually place any value in the criticism."

Seth: Yeah. Obviously, you have people bringing work to you that really has nothing to do with your interests or even what you consider to be good art, whereas they could just walk one table over and be considered a genius.

Sim: *I did have an interesting experience recently here in town of the local theatre company's program where they do a reading of a play that a playwright has been working on for a year or two, and members of the public are invited to come in and offer suggestions and criticism, and I enjoyed that experience. It's as if someone's inviting you to crawl under their hood and tinker with their engine. I have no interest in anybody crawling under my hood and tinkering with my engine. But if you really want to know what I think is wrong with Act Two, or what I really think the core of the play is that you're missing—hey, I can be wrong, and I could be steering you completely wrong, throwing you off your own stride, but if that's what you think that you need, okay I'll take that at face value.*

Seth: *[vaguely horrified]* Do you think that you would enjoy being an *editor*?

Sim: *You mean, like, a full-time job?*

Seth: Yeah, or even for just a period of months, editing a variety of writers' works, say.

Sim: *No. I think—well, maybe in the way that Archie Goodwin was an editor on* Epic Illustrated *magazine.*

Seth: What was his approach?

Sim: *Basically, I don't think Archie ever accepted a piece of work that he didn't think was already at least 98% of the way "there." He might "tweak" it a bit or "nudge" it a "bit" or offer a few suggestions, but if you rebelled at all at any of his suggestions, that was fine, he would leave it exactly the way you wanted it to be published.*

Seth: That's because he felt simpatico with the writers' sensibilities?

Sim: *I think that he had such a level of expertise—having worked with all of the old EC artists at Warren, and having done a lot of work on newspaper strips and what-not—that he had a good working knowledge of what it was that went into a good comics story, so his criticisms were usually valid. There you get into the problem, however, where you would have to ask, "If Joe Blow were making this same criticism, would I be taking it the same way, or am I saying, 'Well, he's got to be right because he's Archie Goodwin?'"*

Seth: I think one of the secrets of criticism is that it has to come from a source where you actually place any value in the criticism.

Sim: *Right.*

Seth: —I mean, it's got to be someone whose opinion I'd respect before I'd even give it the consideration of whether they might not have a point.

Sim: *Yeah.*

Seth: I think I tend to write off other people's opinions, because my own tendency is to go with my own opinion unless I'm presented with something that strongly counters it.

Sim: *Yeah. I mean it's been interesting in doing this piece, in talking to all the different guys about the degree to which they allow and encourage criticism, where they get it from. Will Eisner, as an example, didn't show his work to his wife, Ann, for the first twenty-five years of their marriage. Then, in the graphic novel time period, she became one of his surrogate readers. I asked Frank Miller if he shows his work to Lynn [Varley] and, no, he doesn't show his work to Lynn. Do you show your work to Tanya?*

Seth: No. Mostly because, to be perfectly honest, I

don't think that she's that interested. I think she's interested on a certain level, but I don't think that comics are a big interest of hers, and I actually feel that she would probably—*[laughs]* I don't trust her to be honest enough, in truth. I think she'd be too "encouraging"—um—

Sim: *And you're past that point now. That mutual admiration society thing.*

Seth: Yeah, exactly. With my own work with her, I put it in her hands and let her decide whether she wants to look at it or not. That's *after* publication.

Sim: *So, it's all pretty much after publication?*

Seth: Yeah. I'm trying to think—*[pause]* I think one of the reasons that I don't show people the work before publication is not that I'm so convinced that I'm right, than I'm more concerned about being influenced to believe that I'm wrong.

Sim: *Well, that was the same reaction that I had with the example I used on the panel—and a couple of times since then—of the text pieces in* Jaka's Story. *I would never have asked anyone's opinions on that because I'm pretty sure everyone's reaction would have been, "No, text doesn't belong in a comic book."*

Seth: Exactly. And, I mean, you already *knew* that *[laughs]*, so you had to fight it to begin with.

Sim: *Exactly. So, I think it's one of those—as you said back at the beginning—situations of choosing to stand or fall based entirely on what I perceive to be my own merits. I would hate to think of changing a work of mine to accommodate those opinions and then ten years later be re-reading it and going, "No, I think I should have stuck with my first choice."*

Seth: I think, too, that as I'm getting older, that I'm getting less concerned with—I think initially I had some worry of putting something out and feeling foolish. Like, maybe it would be nice to get an outside opinion to make sure that it isn't absolutely stupid before I let it go into print. I think I'm more comfortable with the idea that this is what I do.

Sim: *Yeah.*

Seth: I mean, my attitude now is: if it's stupid, then I guess I'm stupid. I'm not going to be able to reinvent my mind just before publication, you know, to make sure that everyone thinks well of me. If I want this to be a reflection of how my mind works, then I've got to have some faith that I know what's right. That doesn't mean that I couldn't be making serious mistakes in the crafting of the story. Obviously, I'm always going to be looking at the story later on and saying, "Maybe I should've had two panels here instead of one," or "I have to add another page in here [in the collected version] to slow this down" or something. But when it comes to the basics of the story *itself*, you've got to have some confidence to be able to—certainly as time goes on—to just be able to put it out there, and to be able to say, you know, my opinion has to be the most valid opinion about my own work in the end.

Sim: *Yeah, I picked up on that when I was doing the interview with Craig Thompson and—he's only been in the business for a few years at this point—and he was talking about that level of anxiety at the end of the working day of looking at what you've written and wondering if this is even a story, or is this the sort of hen-scratch that the average college student would produce just sitting in a coffee shop? And I think you're going to have those concerns for a while until you've produced enough material so that eventually you can just look at finished work and say, "This is how I tell my stories."*

Seth and Vortex publisher Bill Marks in Church & State II.

Seth: I think when you're young, you have a lot more things in your mind of what you're looking to do, the people whose work you've read that have had an impact on you, and you kind of have an idea of What Work Should Be. You don't know what your *own* work is yet, but once you've done enough of your own work—you don't really pick your style. It picks you.

Sim: *Yeah, it doesn't matter what you do, your work comes out on the page.*

Seth: Exactly. Your only hope is that whoever you are turns out to be any good. I have a question that's kind of unrelated to this. Do you feel that living in Kitchener has had a specific effect on your work itself? Not to imply "regionalism" of any sort, but do you feel that the physical place that you live in has had an effect on your work, or that the work has been separate from "where you are"?

Sim: *As with just about any question along those lines, the*

problem that I have with it is that there's no "control group." If there were a Dave Sim that lived in Toronto or a Dave Sim that had lived in New York instead of just travelling to those places infrequently, I could look at his work and look at Kitchener Dave Sim's work and say, "Okay, here are the differences." I think probably the fact that I was the only comic-book artist around here in town probably made a difference. In all likelihood it probably made me—just tying it in with what we're talking about—made me less inclined to seek out criticism. All of the reaction that I got because it was at conventions or in the mail was so "far after the fact" that I was always working on different stuff and wasn't really that enamoured of what I did three months ago anyway.

Seth: I think it's kind of interesting—the difference between cartoonists and painters—in that painters, even if they're working toward the international stage, they tend to be involved in some sort of local scene. They still have a place in town where they hang their work, and they're connected to the area that they're in—at least in the early stages—and have a connection with their peers, whereas with cartoonists it seems like a more strangely solitary profession. Your work goes out into the world independently and has little to do with the actual environment that you live in—in the way that other art "scenes" do. Still, I think that when you're dealing with life, you can't help but have the place that you live be an integral part of the work, somehow. But in the case of cartooning, it's not as obvious what that is.

Sim: *There's probably more Actual Kitchener in my work than, say, Arts Kitchener,* per se. *I'm going to the City Council meetings regularly now, and Community Services is the umbrella municipal department over the various arts organizations here in town. And it's all the very, you know, "artsy-fartsie avant garde" mystifying public works constructions done by the "oh where are we going to get our next grant?" types. And I just know if I tried to talk to anybody in that environment it would, like, 'Ewww, cartooning."* [Seth laughs] *Or "ewww, comic books."*

Seth: And to some degree we have the same response towards them—

“[N]o one tends to go out and buy a comic book because they read an article about it.”

Sim: *Yeah, definitely.*

Seth: —the level of irritation with "fine art types" and the seriousness with which they take what they're doing, which seems to me—

Sim: *—relative to what it is—*

Seth: —I mean, I can see how you can look down your nose at a certain amount of cartooning. A certain amount of cartooning deserves to be looked down upon, but I certainly don't think it's valid to look down upon all forms of cartooning from the vantage point of someone who is, like, assembling light bulbs in a box and calling it art.

Sim: [laughing] *Yeah. And you pretty much know, in that case, that it's probably better if I stay over here, and you stay over there. When they have the big Arts Festival every year, I'm not sitting here going, Well, gosh—why didn't they invite me?* [Seth laughs] *Or "Why isn't Cerebus represented in Kitchener's Arts Environment?" And I think our own environment—what I like to call the worldwide comic-book nation—is inherently more interesting. All of our material circulates among people who share our perspective on cartooning, cartooning which exists because there is an actual market for it, and we all know that we are all of us universally looked down upon by so-called "fine" artists who can't make a go of it without Marxist-style subsidies. Everything seems to be—particularly in North America with the direct market getting solidified—everything seems to be coalescing very nicely without any kind of need to participate in any general arts environment. There's no part of me that says, "Yeah, how do I get a Canada Council grant?" or "How can I structure this in such a way that I can get $10,000 out of Kitchener City Council?" It's like, hey, I wrote and drew my comic book, it's selling fine. That's why I can sit there and listen to all of their fine arts drivel and not be concerned by it, apart from the waste of my money as a taxpayer.*

Seth: Have you ever had much, like, civic feedback with *Cerebus* as a locally produced product or anything?

Sim: *None.*

Seth: Really. After all these years—

Sim: *None at all.*

Seth: Well, I'd think in the last few years you'd raised enough controversy to keep people away—if they're even aware of it, I'm not sure.

Sim: *Well, that's the thing. When you're a pariah, there's*

no way of knowing what it is that you're a pariah "about." Is it because you were perceived to be a womanizer, is it because you're an anti-feminist, is it because you think reason is preferable to emotion, is it because you champion creators' rights and that's viewed as "dissing" DC and Marvel, is it because you won't move to Toronto, or is it because the comic-book field is invisible to the real world and there's just no awareness of your existence?

Seth: Well you would think that even ten years ago you had certainly received enough press that the people in Kitchener would have stood up and taken notice.

Sim: *Yeah. It doesn't tend to happen that way. My best assessment is that "press" only works if you're doing music, movies, or television.*

Seth: Well, I would agree with you in the sense that no one tends to go out and buy a comic book because they read an article about it.

Sim: *Right.*

Seth: The simple fact of that is that a comic book is too far outside their normal realm of behaviour. Maybe if that comic book was for sale right in front of their eyes somewhere, and they remembered the article, remembered enough about the article over the couple of weeks since they had read the article—

Sim: *But we both know that that's an enormous stretch of credulity—*

Seth: Yeah, it is.

Sim: *—when compared to what a movie review is going to do, or someone enthusing about a band.*

Seth: Yeah. It kind of depresses me to realize—and there's no point in arguing with it— that movies are the most important art form of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries so far.

Sim: *Well, they're almost universally* perceived *that way. Personally, I don't think that they're actually important in any of my own frames of reference.*

Seth: I think they're extremely influential on people and their thinking, and I think they're important in the sense of, like, "quality art." Certainly I could make a case for individual films as great works of art, but the industry or the overall medium of film is a medium of junk for the most part.

Sim: *Yeah, I do see distant rumblings of interesting permutations going on in the realm of popular perception. There's an awareness in this country—meaning, as usual, Toronto and Montreal—of Seth as "Canada's graphic novelist" just because graphic novels are getting talked about, so Canada has to have one somewhere.*

Seth: Yeah. I think that does have some truth as to how these things work.

Sim: *And you have done enough commercial work in this country that there's the web effect, the connection effect that extends through the CBC, the "right places" in Canada, so consequently when they find out that you're also a graphic novelist, you become THE graphic novelist. Whereas with* Cerebus*—because that's all that I've done—I didn't go out and do commercial work, I don't do movies, I'm not trying to*

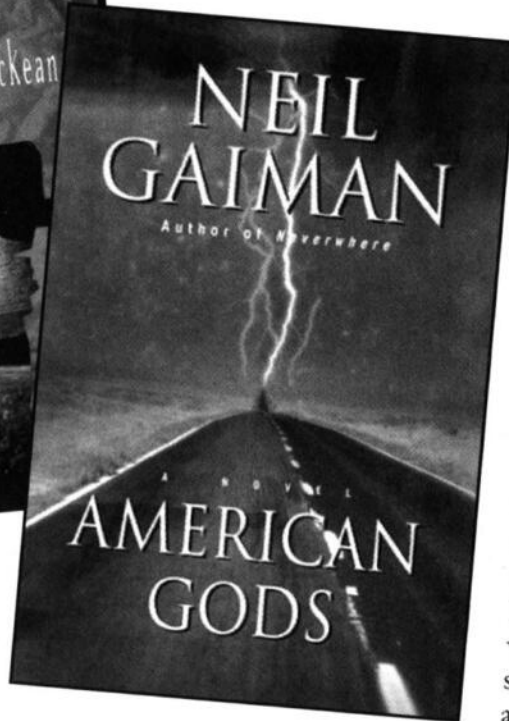
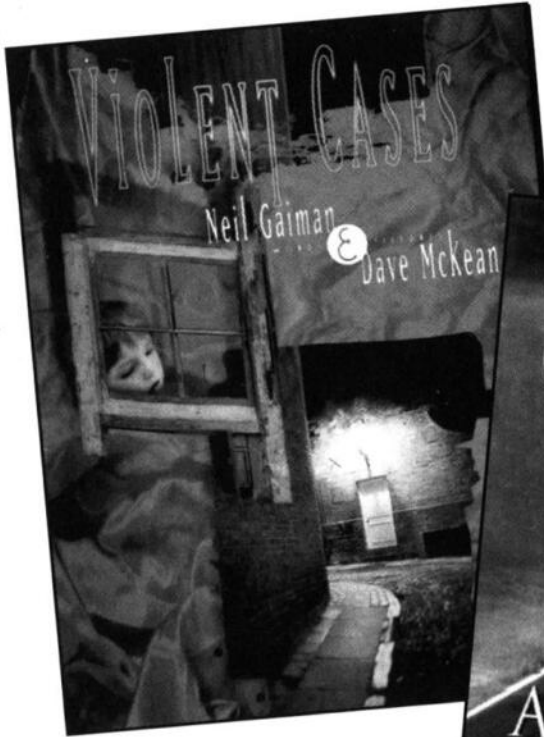
"It kind of depresses me to realize—and there's no point in arguing with it—that movies are the most important art form of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries so far."

get a Canada Council grant—all of those kinds of things where you "network" and become part of it, there's just no way that you're going to show up on the Canadian radar screen.

Seth: Yeah. Well, I would agree with that. I think that the way that the media works—it's like some kind of recognition factor, like when a child is first learning language. You have to have the same thing repeated a certain number of times from a certain number of different sources for it to stick in people's minds, and that's how you develop a certain "name recognition." I think that—

[*And that was where the tape ran out. I think you can see why when Seth and Joe and Chet and I would have dinner, Joe and Chet could seldom get a word in edgewise.*]

Mr. X *art*

Neil Gaiman Interview

Neil Gaiman is the acclaimed writer of the Sandman *comic book series and the novels* Good Omens *(with Terry Pratchett),* American Gods, Coraline, *and the upcoming* Anansi Boys *(just to name a few of the more prominent works). Dave Sim spoke with Neil by phone on May 24. Dave did the transcription; Dave, Neil, and Craig Miller edited the text.*

Sim: *Let me sketch in what our interview is about here. It started with a panel that Chester [Brown] and I did with Will Eisner last June. One of the questions Peter Birkemoe asked was about each of our relationships with editing, which branched off into "Are you edited?" And, of course, Chester mentioned that he doesn't use editors, but he does show his stuff to Seth before publication, and that turned out not to be reciprocal. Seth isn't really interested in what Chet—or anybody else—has to say about his work. So, I've done a few of these interviews just getting feedback from across the whole spectrum. Frank Miller talks about the difference between having virtually no editing on* Sin City*—apart from showing it to Diana [Schutz], and if Diana says, "Her head's too big," then Frank makes her head smaller—whereas with Bob Shreck, when Frank's doing stuff on Batman, like he says, that's a half-billion dollar franchise, so you have to be far more open to input. So, I guess the question for you is—well, first of all, do you consider the* Black Orchid *material a graphic novel? Should we be considering that your first graphic novel?*

Gaiman: Actually, I consider *Violent Cases* my earliest graphic novel. That came first and *Black Orchid*—I don't know. I tend to leave that out. Making mental lists, there are a few things I tend to leave out. *Black Orchid*, there are bits in it that I like, but I'm just not really a fan of it.

Sim: *Okay, let's go with* Violent Cases.

Gaiman: There, essentially, my editor was Dave McKean. And the way I wrote that one was a bit odd, because I had seen some of Dave McKean's early work, and all I had learned from it was that he had so much better a sense of design and page layout and storytelling than I did that I really didn't want to do a script for him that was "Page one, panel one...," which I had only done for Dave once in our entire collaboration: on the *Hellblazer* that we did. And that was only because it was originally written for Dean Motter, and then Dean Motter went off on his honeymoon, or something, and was never seen again, so it went over to Dave. Dave had already drawn a couple of strips, one of which started with a helicopter's-eye view of the Statue of Liberty, going round and round it. And I realized I would never think of something like that and would never dream of telling an artist to start there. So, with *Violent Cases*, I wrote it as a short story—I just wrote the words with the idea that Dave would just fill in the pictures. And there were parts where he would say, "I can do this thing that you've said here entirely in pictures." And he'd cut things out. He was my editor. The nominal editor on the book was Paul Gravett of *Escape* fame. But, really, what Paul did—which is what most of my editors in comics over the years have done—was to say "yes" to the original project. He came to me and Dave and asked if we'd do a five-page strip for *Escape*. And then, when we came back a few weeks later and asked, "Would it be all right if we did this as a 48-page graphic novel?" he sort of nodded and said, "Yes, all right, that would be fine."

Sim: *Were there any decisions that Dave made on the project where you said, "No, I'd rather that you didn't do that?" or "I'd rather that you did it this way?"*

Gaiman: No.

Sim: *So that really does indicate that he was the guy in the driver's seat.*

Gaiman: In the sense that I had written the story and given it to him and wanted to see what he was going to do with it, I think it's more like a game of

tennis or of ping-pong or something than it is a matter of someone being "in the driver's seat." The movie we just did, *The Mirror Mask,* Dave was very much in the driver's seat. He had input into the story. He had sequences and images that he felt needed to be part of the story. We created the story together and, in fact, there were places in the story where Dave actually wrote chunks of the script. It was quicker and easier for him to write a chunk of the script than for him to try to explain to me. He'd try and explain "Look, I have this idea in my head of two giants made of stone, and one of them is gravitationally drawn upwards, and the other is gravitationally attracted downwards so that always they're hanging in the same place, and they're going to be moving around this thing, making tiny adjustments ...." And he'd be explaining this stuff, and I'd just be staring at him *[Sim laughs],* so it was easier for him to just go off and bash out two or three pages of "this is what I mean," and I'd go, "Oh, I get it," and then I'd work over the actual dialogue.

Sim: *So, using my terminology, that was a "driver's seat" situation and you wouldn't put* Violent Cases *in that same category.*

Gaiman: No, *Violent Cases* I viewed as a collaboration. I guess because of the way you phrased your question of "once you handed it to the artist were there things where you said 'No, I want it this way'"—no, that wasn't the case, and the same is true of 99.9% of everything I've done. The script is written—and I'm always writing it with the artist in mind—and I assume that if I'm doing *my* job, then what I'm going to get back is—that's the joy of comics. I get something back, and I look at it, and I go, "This is so cool." Normally they haven't changed things. *Sandman* was about 2,000 pages—roughly 12,000 panels—and I can think of—three?—panels that were redrawn? Off the top of my head. There may be a couple of others. No more than six, but I can think of three. There was a panel in "Calliope" [*Dream Country* chapter one] that was just too strong. It wasn't even too strong. It was during the scene where Richard Madoc was raping Calliope, and it just jerked you out of the story. I mean Kelley Jones really just went to town, and it was shocking. But it was shocking on a level that you barely noticed the next two pages, because you were still reeling from that. So we went back in and just used an area of a previous panel over that one. There was a panel of wolf sex which I never actually saw, but I remember the editor had Duncan Eagleson redraw in "The Hunt"—which I think was in *Sandman* 38 or 39 [#39; *Fables & Reflections*]—just to make it a little less "plain." And there was one panel in "The Wake" where the DC editors got very upset that I'd had a panel with Superman, Batman, and the Martian Manhunter standing around at Morpheus' funeral [issue 71, page 22] having the kind of conversation in dreams that I assumed that they would have—Superman and Batman are both grumbling about the fact that they ordinarily have these dreams where they're characters in a television show—

Sim: [amused] *Right.*

Gaiman: —and the Martian Manhunter is saying that he never gets those kinds of dreams. And in

"*Sandman* was about 2,000 pages...and I can think of—three?—panels that were redrawn?"

the panel description and the way that Michael Zulli drew it, I had Superman dressed as Clark Kent but with his cloak coming out from under the jacket—

Sim: [more amused] *Right.*

Gaiman: —and I had him turning his head, trying to see it. Because I figured if you're Superman, that's the dream that you're always going to have—

Sim: *The cape sticking out.*

Gaiman: —dressed as Clark Kent wondering, "Did I tuck the cape in?" The one where you're walking along and people are laughing at you. And they said, "No," that was not respectful. So Mike Carlin [the Superman editor at the time] made Michael Zulli redraw that. But, in terms of *[pauses]*—

Sim: *But that's almost into a new category of—[of*

Above: Kelley Jones art from "Calliope."
Below: Duncan Eagleson art from "The Hunt."

what?]—of the borderline between editing and censorship, isn't it? I see that as connecting with some of the things that I started finding the more that I examined the nature of editing and where it overlaps other jurisdictions. One of Will's points on the panel where he would talk about the newspaper editors saying, "Don't make the women so sexy" in The Spirit. *And I'm not really sure that that qualifies as "editing." Because it's not that they were looking at it and saying, "The fact that these women are this sexy is undermining the story," it's "This is too sexy for our newspaper."*

Gaiman: I think—I mean, you're right. I could talk—and probably will during this conversation—very, very easily about how I *get* edited, how I *have been* edited, and how I call on friends and work with them and so forth on the *prose* stuff. But in *comics*—

"I'd never show the *[Sandman]* script to friends because...a comics script isn't an easy thing to read."

partly, I suspect, because of the nature of the process—the only person who would ever see the script would be my assistant editor—whether it was Alisa Kwitney or Tom Peyer or Art Young or Shelly Bond—and Karen [Berger] and the artist. I'd never show the script to friends because, frankly, a comics script isn't an easy thing to read. It's not an easy thing for the average person to break down in their heads so that they're able to tell you, "You know, that part there. That's not going to work." And there are things that become obvious only in the drawing stage where, as the writer, you'll say, "That word balloon takes up an awful lot of that panel, I need to break it into two." But, that's something you're only going to see once it's drawn. The script isn't something that you can show somebody. The very first two scripts that I ever wrote—which were really just for me to see if I was mastering the form or not—I sent both of them to Alan [Moore]. And he read the first one and he said *[impeccable Alan Moore impression]:* "Yeah, that's all right. It's got some problems towards the end—."

Sim: [laughing] *Right.*

Gaiman: —and the next one he read a week or two later and said, "Yeah, that's good. I'd have been pleased to have written that." And that, for me, was probably *[laughing]* all the editing that I ever really wanted. As long as you don't have panel descriptions of "the entire Cheyenne Nation coming over the hill, while in the foreground someone is setting off 820 small rockets" and then described something else that happens a few seconds later as occurring in the same panel—as long as you're not doing those kinds of things, the script is really just a letter to the artist to tell him what to draw.

Sim: *So with the script taking the form of, as you say, a letter to the artist telling him or her what the images are supposed to be and, as you say, if you have something like a rape scene in the story and the artist really "goes to town" on it as you indicate Kelley Jones did on the rape scene in "Calliope," then at some point that is going to bring in the editor or in your own case even you looked at it and said, "This is not a hill to die on—I find this distracting or dislocating from the story that I'm trying to tell here."*

Gaiman: I think in that particular case, the "Calliope" one where you've got a naked Muse imprisoned in an attic, I knew already that we were walking a fine line on that. I knew that we had to make sure that it wasn't salacious, and I also knew that we wanted to make sure that it wasn't going to leave the reader so numbed or horrified that you'd lose them at that point. And there was the one panel where both Karen and I thought that it "misstepped." It really wasn't a censorship thing—

Sim: *Well, no. If it comes down to three panels out of 12,000 then that's just going to be a storytelling thing. It would be unlikely that censorship would enter into it [in retrospect I'd modify that to: if it were censorship, it was minimal censorship at a ratio of 1:4,000].*

Gaiman: Now, we had in the entire run of *Sandman*, as far as I remember, a grand total of two situations which involved editorial dictates, one of which was perhaps censorship and one of which was a brilliant suggestion. The censorship one—which in today's frames of reference was just sort of a funny thing, reminding us of the time period in which *Sandman* was done, because these days it would be "*so* not an issue"— was the serial killers' convention one, where I had a one-page sequence where one of these serial killers—I had this conceit where he would be talking about sex and being incredibly explicit, but as soon as he got onto the subject of killing people, he'd get really, really euphemistic—
Sim: [interested as a writer] *Right.*
Gaiman: —and I thought that might be really interesting. And the way I began the narration was, "I used to masturbate compulsively." But, when he gets onto the subject of killing, he starts talking about "*doing* it." And how much he likes "*doing* it." And I got this note from Karen saying that—according to Jenette Kahn [DC's president at the time]—people do not masturbate in the DC Universe *[Sim laughs]* and asking me, please can you get a little euphemistic about this? So, I had to rework it, which lost the point of the narration I was working towards, and I felt kind of badly about that. However, I was sufficiently amused by finding out that people do not masturbate in the DC Universe that it took a bit of the edge off my frustration as a writer. And I do think it helps explain why they all put on colourful costumes and hit each other—
Sim: *I think the bulges in the shorts would be a little bigger at this point if that were the case*[1]*—*
Gaiman: *[laughs]* But that's something that I also don't tend to think of as editing *per se*. On the other hand, there was the one huge one, which was when I sent in the script for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" to Karen. And she read it, and she phoned me up, and she said, "I really don't know from Shakespeare. So, a lot of the Shakespeare stuff you have in here, I don't really get. I've read the whole thing, and I don't think that there's any emotional heart to it. I'm not quite sure what it's about, apart from you wanting to write Shakespeare stuff and faeries for Charlie [artist Charles Vess] to draw." She said, "Please, will you have another look at the script?" And I looked over the script, and I ended up cutting down one of the scenes in order to give a page to Hamnet, Shakespeare's son, where he's looking at his dad, and he's backstage, and he's trying to explain that as far as his father is concerned, he's almost just another character living inside his father's head and that, if he died, he would just write a play about him called *Hamnet*.

Sim: *Right.*
Gaiman: I wrote that page, and now the story had a heart.
Sim: *That's a good point.*
Gaiman: I mean, on the one hand, that's the only example of editorial resistance that I remember on the whole of *Sandman* and, on the other hand, that piece of editorial input probably got me the World Fantasy Award that year *[Sim laughs]*, which made that issue something more than just a very clever issue where people would say, "Oh, yes, that was a very clever bit of writing, Neil's very clever" and,

> "[T]hat piece of editorial input probably got me the World Fantasy Award that year."

instead, made it into something that mattered in some way.
Sim: *I guess the other half of the question that I was curious about was the aspect of consultation. The different guys I've interviewed have tended to break down into different categories. For Craig Thompson, evidently, there are three or four people that he shows everything to, gets feedback and input from them—essentially, "Do you see any holes or flaws in this?" Again, I think this might be a situation—because you're a scripter—like you say it's already covered in the fact that people, even if you gave them a script and asked them to read it critically and give you feedback on it, it's a far*

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[1] *Speaking as someone who hadn't masturbated for nearly two years at the time of the interview, I found Neil's observation to be the exact opposite of the situation: I think, like any form of "venting"—in which category I now see masturbation—it tends to provoke "venting" as lifestyle. In the two years since I last masturbated, I haven't lost my temper once, whereas I used to lose my temper pretty regularly back in the days when I indulged in the solitary vice, or Joe Matt's Disease, as we refer to it in Southern Ontario.*

greater imposition than giving somebody a comic-book story to read either in photocopy form or the original artwork.

Gaiman: Yes. On the other hand, I always have what I think of as my "beta readers" for prose. Some people for short stories, some people for novels, some for both—

Sim: *The same people all the time?*

Gaiman: No, not necessarily. Sometimes they're the same people, and sometimes they're people who— "I wonder what X would think of this?" It can be something—as with the new novel, the one I just finished called *Ananci Boys*—where, for some of the people I sent it to, it was a matter of, "Look, I just finished a draft, and I want to find out whether this works." And I looked over my e-mail and thought, Oh, *these* people, I think *these* people would enjoy it, and I sent it off to them. But, there were also people where there's police stuff in here, and I know a police officer in the north of England, so I'll send it off to him and see what he thinks. And I look for different kinds of reactions from people. And it was very, very interesting, because I sent the first draft of *Ananci Boys* to probably a dozen people, including my editor in America and my editor in England and got feedback from everybody. And the feedback that I got was more or less unanimous, although of course nobody besides me really knew that it was. Things that people were "tripping over" tended to be more or less the same. I don't think either of my book's editors—either the one in England or the one in America—as a result were in a particularly privileged position as the book's editors. They mentioned things that they liked and things they had problems with, but they were more or less the same things that everyone else had liked and everyone else had had problems with. And it was just very useful for me getting to the end of that first draft and realizing—after a few weeks had gone by and I had had the chance to read what had come back from everybody—that what had happened with that book was that I started getting tired toward the end, and there was one sequence that I'd kind of tried to get away with implying and hadn't actually written. And what became obvious was that everyone was tripping up on the sequence that I hadn't written, and the biggest editorial change that I made was to go away and write an extra few thousand words and put those scenes in. And suddenly the book actually flowed properly, and people weren't tripping up over the implied scene that wasn't written.

Sim: *Let me interrupt for a second. Does that worry you as a comic-book scripter to realize that you can't get that same kind of feedback with a comic-book story? That you can't just fire out a comic-book script to twelve people and get that same sort of "helpful triangulation"?*

Gaiman: Not really. But, then I've always been very willing—*[pause]*—let me put this another way. In some ways that's the same question in comics—

Bill Sienkiewicz art from Endless Nights

for me, anyway—as, when I asked you many years ago if you had any desire to go back and fix any earlier parts of *Cerebus*, to redraw any parts or rewrite any parts and you said, No, that's all part of it, that you keep going and that you can't go back and fix things. And that's always how I feel about comics, whereas with a novel there's always a kind of feeling that you *do* have another chance to get it right—that you can keep buffing and polishing it because it is just "my words." I'm not that worried, whereas with comics there are places where I look at things and—let me think of an example. Oh, *1602*, the thingy that I did for Marvel. It became apparent as I headed toward the end that I really hadn't left myself the space that I should've done. Things were taking longer, and it was the same problem that I always had on *Sandman*. It took a little longer than I thought it would to tell. And suddenly you're heading into the end, and you realize that you're going to need another hundred pages to tell the end in, and you're going to have—by dint of negotiating on the phone—you've got 38 pages rather than 22. And now, what are you doing? So bits of plot get thrown overboard, and other bits are just happening too quickly. But, that's what happens *[laughs]* because it's a monthly comic.

Sim: *But, it's also an implication of working with someone else's talents. It's one thing to sit down and revise five pages of text—I'm going to make these* five *pages of text into*

ten *pages of text—but it's very difficult to do that when you're collaborating with an artist.*

Gaiman: Exactly. When we actually did the graphic novel, the collection of *1602,* there was this one place where Andy Kubert had had to grit his teeth and drawn eight panels on a page. I said, "Let's just make this into two pages." So we took those eight squished little panels that should've been much bigger and turned them into two four-panel pages that didn't feel as squished. But, I feel that that sort of thing is all part of the game. The joy for me of comics and especially as a writer doing comics is all the different things that can happen, and all the different ways you can do it. *Endless Nights*—let's take that as an example. There were stories in there that I wrote on a strict "Page one, panel one" basis—for Craig Russell, as an example (although Craig would occasionally decide to break something down into three panels, which was always a delight, because Craig paces things so beautifully, and he has a much better idea of how Craig Russell tells stories than I do). Miguelanxo Prado just drew the story exactly the way that I had written it. Panel for panel, beat for beat, which again was lovely. Whereas Bill Sienkiewicz—for whom I had written a story in as loose a way as I could, having spoken to people over the years who had worked with Bill and knowing that what I would get back would be nothing like what I had written anyway—Bill's art came in last of all, and it was wonderful and strange and really, really cool, and nothing at all like what I'd written—

Sim: [laughing] *Who had warned you about that? Was it Frank [Miller] who had told you about that with* Elektra: Assassin*?*

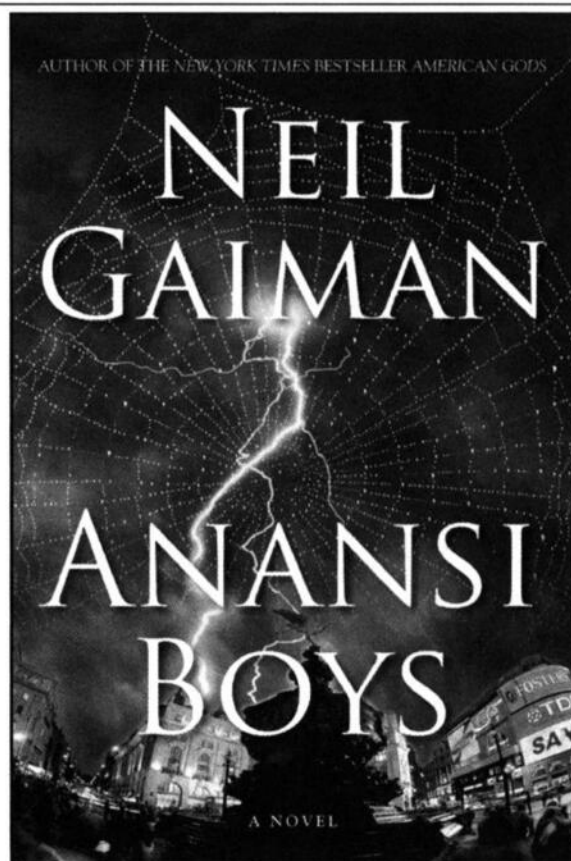
Gaiman: Frank had told me about that with *Elektra: Assassin,* and I think [DC editor] Andy Helfer had told me about it. A few people had mentioned things over the years, but mostly Frank. And, in fact, I told Frank about getting Bill's art in and laying it all down on the floor of the bedroom—because there was enough space there to "walk along it"—and then moving pages around *[Sim laughs]* and then phoning Bill and saying, "Bill? This sequence you've done of going into the Dream World, did you do any *more* pages that you haven't sent me, that are just sitting on your computer?" He says, "Oh, dozens of them, yeah." And I said, "Would you send me a couple?" *[Sim laughs]* So another two pages arrive, so I put them into the mix. And when I told Frank the story, his jaw dropped, and he said *[intense Frank Miller impression],* "You *changed the pages around.* I never *thought* of doing that."

Sim: [laughing] *It would've been a completely different* Elektra.

Gaiman: It would've been a completely different *Elektra.* So I was able to take his first page and say, "I think Bill's first page would actually make a really nice second-to-last page." You know? If Bill's having that much fun completely deconstructing what I've given him and constructing something new, I'm just going to start off with the images and work up from there and create something *else* new because I can.

Sim: [Not a "Neil" way of phrasing it, which I realized even as I was saying it] *Turnabout is fair play.*

Gaiman: I guess, but it was more like—

Sim: *But isn't that the case? I mean, if you had gotten in anything that—at the core of it—was trying to stay as faithful*

as possible to what you were trying to do. then you wouldn't have done something as radical as rearranging the pages.

Gaiman: There was also the fact that if I had handed the script that I had written to a letterer with the artwork that I got from Bill as it came in, he would've phoned me up and said, "So, what do I do with this?"

Sim: [laughing] *"Where do these go, anyway?"*

Gaiman: "What relevance do they have to what's there?" And that's why it was, "Okay, cool." It was an open playing field, and Bill loved what I did with it. And, again, it was just like another serve in table tennis, back across.

Sim: *That would be a pretty unique circumstance. I bet you never had anything in that sort of category before in collaborating.*

Gaiman: No, I never had, and it was a delight, and it was—um *[actually remembering it],* I do remember the blood draining from my face *[laughing]* when the first batch of pages came in. "What do I *do* with these?" And I thought, "Well, let's have fun with it." So that's what I did. It was the combined joy of putting them down on the floor and saying, "I can move them." That was his, I think, page fourteen, but it's now my page two. And I think it worked.

Sim: *Well, I have to go back and take another look at it now* [Gaiman laughs] *with that in mind.*

Gaiman: It's a lot less linear than some of the other stories in the same book but, yes, that was how it was created. Bill is a genius, and he was put on the earth to drive writers mad *[Sim laughs].* And I loved doing it, and I'd love to do something else with Bill. But I think if I did write something else, I'd write something even more formless.

Sim: *I wonder if Bill drove himself mad with* Stray Toasters *[the graphic novel he wrote and drew]?*

Gaiman: It could well be. You could see "Bill the scripter" going, "Omigosh."

Sim: *"What have I done? Where's my story? You bastard, bring my story back!"*

Gaiman: Actually I loved *Stray Toasters.* I had no idea what was going on, and I still loved it.

"I [got] Bill [Sienkiewicz]'s art in and [laid] it all down on the floor of the bedroom and then [started] moving pages around."

Sim: *Oh, I did too. I just saw Bill at Torontocon a couple of weeks ago and told him that that's still very much at the top of my personal pantheon of Great Comics Works which—there are more people in the comic-book field with question marks on their faces about that one—but it was exactly what Bill had to say. And it seemed to me that it was a definite step up from* Elektra: Assassin, *which was the big question at the time. How do you follow* Elektra: Assassin? *Nobody had ever seen storytelling like that and certainly not* painted *storytelling like that.*

Gaiman: And also fully painted storytelling that would move from watercolour to crayon to bits of lace glued on and wallpaper—whatever worked to tell the story, he just put it down on the art, and it was amazing.

Sim: *I was at the UK Comic Art Convention that year with [Steve] Bissette and [John] Totleben, and there were two or three other guys, and we were just sitting around the lobby of the hotel, and here comes Bill, and he says, "Hey, anybody want to see the job that I'm working on? I'm working on a thing called* Elektra: Assassin *with Frank Miller." And it's like, "Sure, Bill. Pull it out, let's take a look."* [Gaiman laughs] *And it was one of those times when everyone's jaw hit the floor, and it was like, "We've all got a lot of running to do to catch up with* this *boy."*

Gaiman: There was that moment of watching Bill run out in front of everyone else. And I just remember *Elektra* #1 coming out and looking at it and my jaw dropping and knowing that the playing field had just gotten bigger.

Sim: *Yeah. I guess the last question that I've got is—and it came up on the panel when Will mentioned that for the first twenty-five years of his marriage, he didn't really think that Ann had any idea what he did for a living, that she must've thought that he was a bootlegger—he just went away in the morning and then came home at night. And then later on, she became one of his key "surrogate readers" along with Dave Schreiner when he would do the full dummy copy of his graphic novels. So, I've been sort of asking that question of the married guys. I asked Frank, "Do you show your work to Lynn?" And, no, he doesn't show his work to Lynn. And I asked Seth if he shows his stuff to Tania. And he said, no, he doesn't show his stuff to Tania. So, I guess I have the same question for you. Do you show your stuff ahead of time to Mary?*

Gaiman: When it's all done. When I'm happy with it, I'll show it to her. But, I remember many, many, many years ago—probably 1988, because I think I was writing *Good Omens*—and she walked past while I was typing, read something and suggested a way that a sentence could be different *[Sim laughs].* And I blew up. With a ferocity—*[recoiling defensively from the memory]*—I'm a very mild-mannered person.

Sim: [teasing] *I've* noticed *that about you.*

Gaiman: *[not quite sure how to take that]* I'm a very mild-mannered person to be married to. I'm a very mild-mannered person, *overall.* And I blew up with a ferocity that astonished both of us. And *[laughs]* it just didn't—didn't really work. It was like both of us learning, "Okay, this is something that you don't do." For years, she was very—she likes the prose stuff and *thought* that she didn't like the comics. And then when *Sandman* was completely over, one day she said, "Can I read *Sandman?*" And I said, "Sure." And I got them all out for her, and she spent like two days reading it. And she came back, and she said, "This is brilliant. This is what you were doing for the last decade. *[Sim laughs]* This is absolutely fucking brilliant." Which was very nice, particularly after all the dinners that we had had with people in the past, where they'd say, "So, Mary, what do *you* think of *Sandman?*" And she'd say "Oh, I don't read

it."

Sim: Right.

Gaiman: But, no. I'll show her stuff only when it's done—probably for a number of reasons, including, like, with the short stories, the fact that she knows me too well. So, she can look at a short story and say, "Oh, this is from that. This is that thing you got upset with or this is based on that."

Sim: This is that episode turned sideways.

Gaiman: Yes. But, you're going, "Yes, but I don't want you thinking that way when you're reading it—*[Sim laughs]*—you can't read that from that point of view. I want you to read it as a short story, and what do you think of it as a short story?" So, no I don't. But she'll read stuff before it's published. But only once I'm satisfied with it, I'll print it out and give it to her. In a state where she can say, "That character's name was Graeme with an 'e' everywhere else in the book, but suddenly you started spelling it without the 'e' in chapter six." And I'll go back and fix it.

Sim: That's another *one of the areas that we got into. The difference between proof-reading and advising editorially: that it's one thing to say "I don't think this character works"; it's another thing to say that there are two "c's" in "access."*

Gaiman: There are two c's in access, but it's also things like: the character's name is Omar, and didn't he have green eyes the last time we met him, and why are they brown now?

Sandman *parody in* Women

Sim: Is there a sort of mutual agreement with Mary, now, that that's what it's restricted to, or does she advise you on sentences, having been subjected to this unconscionable blow-up of yours?

Gaiman: *[laughing]* Umm—

Sim: Didn't I phrase that nicely?

Gaiman: You phrased it very, very nicely. The thing is, once I've written it, I'm fine. I think it was more the fact that I was—*chewing over* the sentence, you know? Sort of staring at it on the screen, not quite happy about it and a million miles away in Writing Land—

Sim: Right.

Gaiman: —where she looked over and said, "Oh, that sentence doesn't really work." *[Angry]* "I *KNOW* it doesn't work—" and it was a little like *"DROP the bottle of nitro-glycerine why don't you?"* But, no, I don't think she's particularly scared of offering advice as a result any more than anyone else is. The thing that's *really* weird that's not so much an editing thing but is more in the category of having other people see stuff and having other people see stuff *early* is now, of course, I also have kids. And I have a ten-year-old, a nineteen-year-old, and a twenty-one-year old, so they also sort of wind up getting e-mailed short stories and novels and stuff if I think they'd enjoy them. For the older ones. And for the younger one, if I think she'd enjoy something, I'll read it to her.

Sim: *And you're the one who has to decide when the time's right, when she's old enough for—whatever content.*

Gaiman: Yes. So you also have that in your head as well. I remember remarking to Mary years ago that the weirdest bit of that is, as a young writer every time I'd get to a point in a work which required a description of a blow-job or something questionable, I'd picture my parents looking over my shoulder—*[Sim laughs]*—and I'd have to go, "No no no, Mum and Dad, go away, I have to write this." And picturing that someday my parents might read this and thinking, oh well, I'm a writer, this is what I do. And at one point, I had completely exorcised that: I really didn't worry about that anymore. And right at that point was where I started thinking, oh, yeah, someday my *kids* are apt to read this, too. *[laughs]* Oh, well.

Sim: You just have to be philosophical about it and do it for the cause of literature. "Lie back and think of England." [Neil laughs][2]

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[2] *That one's maybe a bit obscure. It is reputedly the advice that mothers in Victorian England gave their newlywed daughters about how to get through the disgusting physical act associated with marital relations.*

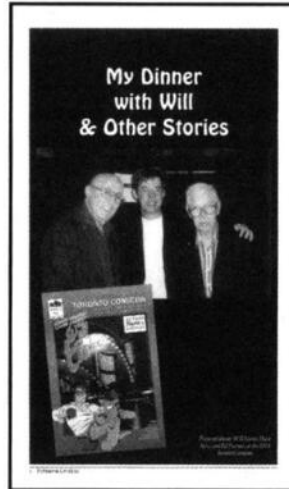
About Last Issue

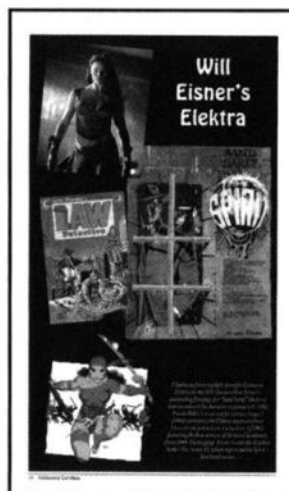
by Dave Sim

Why Will Eisner?

Good batch of quotes.

My Dinner with Will & Other Stories

It's one of the interesting aspects of Islam that the shifting prayer times makes you lose track of what life is like at different points on the calendar. Writing the piece during the winter, I mentally pictured the first prayer being around 5:30 am whereas it's a lot closer to 4:30 am and during the third weekend in June actually closer to 4:15 (an hour or so before sunrise). I'm not sure how others treat it, but when I'm done praying at 4:30 I do tend to just go back to sleep for two or three hours.

Will Eisner's Elektra

I'm not sure how this is going to go over, but I certainly enjoyed it both for the way it helped illustrate my thesis that Frank Miller is Eisner's chosen heir and for the question raised "Does being a *really* strong, independent woman *necessarily* include homicide?"*

Mind Games

Answer to Randy Mohr's letter: I think this is a natural implication of a 26-year storyline. It's hard to imagine any story that would have a universal approval consensus attached to it when it was finished. Oh, well, maybe it will grow on you. I think a lot of people are very leery of any exposure to the realities of old age, particularly in their entertainment. You might find a lot more in those last fifty issues at the point where you realize that your own life is decidedly finite.

Answer to Nick Walker: 1) Yes, Gerhard was the first one to point out—while issue 300 was being produced—that Cerebus' death was a "something fell" moment and doubtless the sound of him "hitting the deck" would have generated exactly that reaction of Sheshep's part. I hadn't thought of it myself. I briefly considered adding a panel of Sheshep thinking, "something fell" but decided the switch of scene would be inopportune. It was more important to me to establish the fulfillment of the "alone, unmourned and unloved" prophecy. I would certainly encourage Cerebus readers to be picturing the cowering O'Reilly and Sheshep thinking the same thing, however, as it adds a nice level of nuance and nicely foreshadows what would have been the dichotomous transmission through both individuals of what was left of Cerebus' legacy 2) I really had no idea that there were that many dictionary definitions of the term "fell" each of which could, arguably, have an application to the *Cerebus* storyline in general and—particularly—to the nearly universal "drama queen" reactions to it (and me) at various junctures from 186 on out (*a thin, tough membrane covering a carcass directly under the hide; to cut, beat or knock down; to sew a seam by folding one raw edge under the other and sewing flat on the wrong side; FIERCE, CRUEL, TERRIBLE; SINISTER, MALEVOLENT; very destructive, deadly; sharp, pungent, all at once; with a single concentrated effort).* "Something fell" thus would seem to have the "high iconic" appearance of a cautionary note struck for YHWH. "Get ready, YHWH, because you really aren't going to like this."

"What I'm curious about is Dave's view of "who and what Jaka is" in terms of the highest-level chessboard—the God vs. God's-adversary chessboard. That is, is Jaka a gamepiece advanced by God's adversary for the specific purpose of keeping Cerebus from attaining his full potential? If so, when did Dave consciously start casting her in that role?"

This is perhaps a more general question than it might appear to be on the surface. In a very general sense when I had embarked upon the 26-year odyssey of writing and drawing *Cerebus*, knowing that I had a large enough audience and flattering myself that I possessed the writing and drawing chops to complete the work, one of the large questions that intruded was: What, then, are the potential pitfalls and/or circumstances which would militate *against* my finishing the book? The readership thought along the same lines and the "getting hit by a bus" for them assumed the largest likelihood that there would only be 218 or 240 issues. As I've said elsewhere it seems to me that this stems from the fatalistic strain in the post-JFK assassination "s**t happens" gen-

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*Kudos to reader **Matt Fields**, who correctly pointed out that *Roger McKenzie* scripted *Daredevil* 158-166 (except for 162 by Michael Fleisher; also David Michelinie scripted issue 167). Those issues were *not* written by J.M. DeMatteis, as stated in the article. Thanks, Matt!

eration. It seemed entirely more likely to them that you (anyone in a general sense) will die violently than just expire of old age. Dave isn't famous enough to shoot, so that means he'll probably get hit by a bus. The top of my own hit parade was drugs and alcohol and the possibility of frying my brain in such a way that I couldn't finish the story—tremors from the DT's or a heroin overdose or a rampaging cocaine addiction. Never tried heroin but I did try crack cocaine on two occasions and got a sense of a drug that could really eat you alive while you stood by helplessly and watched yourself go down the metaphorical toilet. The only things I saw as being in a comparable category to crack cocaine were women and cigarettes. An attractive woman/girlfriend was like cocaine. You had to watch your step and pay attention and make sure that you were still getting your work done (Elvis' TCB, Taking Care of Business) and not just trailing around after her and catering to her every whim—time and money being fixed and irreplaceable commodities in ensuring that the book got done. Relative to most independent creators we had quite a bit of money but the bank account could've been wiped out in an eye-blink by one good 'foxy lady' shopping expedition. 'E ticket' women—9s and 10s—are like crack cocaine. A part of you would know better and seek to disengage, but all you could do was to just stand by helplessly and watch yourself spending every penny you had and all of your time just trying to hang onto her. Fortunately I was always too much 'small potatoes' for 9s and 10s who were mostly girlfriends of (surprise) coke dealers and musicians.

I'm sure that condition has always existed. Who else is Jezebel? Who else is Salome? And I think it's natural to assume that a Jezebel and a Salome aren't born that way, they're the result of a series of bad choices both on the part of their parents and on their own part as they start developing autonomy—and, as you're all well aware, I do think that a series of bad choices on that scale moves you into the adversary's camp and (particularly if you have no counter-balancing relationship with God) makes you easy to manipulate in such a way as to take action against the God-fearing even as you (and *because* you!) adhere to the adversarial view that all truth is relative and all ethics are situational. And, presumably, left unchecked and endlessly given the benefit of the doubt that ultimately leads to the Whore of Babylon of John's Apocalypse. Yes, I think Jaka's various behaviours point in that direction. She has her good points, but the cumulative effect of her choices through the course of her life had definitely put her opposite God's camp, and she was therefore a convenient chess piece to "take on" Cerebus and dislocate and divert him from his optimum path.

And I think that's pretty common in our society. I think when the highest female motivation is to be a good wife and mother you have one kind of society. When the highest female motivation is to be strong and independent and scrupulously atheistic, I think you slip naturally sideways into a state where women have adopted an adversarial stance relative to men—and relative to society itself—and you end up with another kind of society. Left unchecked that leads directly to the Whore of Babylon and the cup of her fornications. It happens incrementally, but there's no doubt in my mind that if our great-great grandfathers (and particularly our great-great grandmothers) could see the state of our society, their natural conclusion would be that the Whore of Babylon is already here and essentially running the show to the great detriment of man and mankind.

And, of course, cigarettes were in the same category with the same sort of incremental detrimental effect of building lung cancer or emphysema or heart disease, which could've left me fighting a losing battle against any one of those instead of drawing issues 275 to 300, delaying the conclusion past March, 2004 or leaving me short of the goal line and on my death bed.

Reply to Ron Levy: I have to admit that from the time that I read Mary Hemingway's book, I had assumed that the largest motivation that Ernest Hemingway had had on the 1953 safari was to help Mary to bag her own lion largely because his first wife, Pauline, had bagged a lion on the earlier safari. "All of my women are deadly lion hunters," that kind of thing. But you certainly do raise an interesting point, given the fact that a) I ultimately concluded that he had agreed to the second safari only to appease Mary and her Lucy Ricardo-like desperation to "be in the show" with Ricky Ricardo and b) they had already been married for a number of years at that point. Depending on his level of irritation at being coerced into going back to Africa as "Mr. and Mrs. Hemingway, Lion Tamers" on *Look* magazine's nickel, it would certainly make a "don't get mad, get even" kind of sense for him to monkey with the sights on her gun while pretending to be ardently helping her to bag a lion as payback for her making his life miserable until he agreed to the offer from *Look* magazine.

In answering your overarching point, I do think that on a percentage basis, you aren't going to have too many sharpshooters in the ranks of women no matter how many of them you can get to try out for the team. In the same way that most women can't throw a baseball properly (some have an aptitude for throwing a softball under-handed, but they are almost universally hopeless with throwing a hardball over-handed). Men are always going to excel at—for want of a better term—"ejaculatory" sports because their very physical existence is an ejaculatory metaphor. Men grow out of sperm, women grow out of eggs. Men can throw a fastball straight because the unwinding motion of the upper arm, forearm, wrist and hand, culminating in the release of the ball at the optimum moment of potential into kinetic energy is natural to men, "bred in the (if you'll pardon the

expression) bone" originating in the rapid spiral/ corkscrew movements of the tail of the spermatozoa. Men understand "aim" at a genetic level because that was where they came from—aiming for the egg. Women blessed with a higher than usual amount of testosterone will be able to compete at lower levels of masculine competition but they're never going to dominate an ejaculatory sport because they have no genetic basis for it. They grew out of eggs, not out of sperm. And most sports are, by nature, ejaculatory. Men invent them in conformity with their competitive sperm nature.

Put another way, if Mary was genuinely competitive—"just as good as any man"—she should've known how to adjust her own sights on her own gun and should've known what was wrong when her shots were always missing to roughly the same degree and in the same direction. It is hard to imagine a man going through a whole safari without noticing the same thing and it's even harder to imagine one of her 'boys" whose job it was to be gunbearers and to help her with her shooting not checking to see if the sights were properly aligned when she proved unable to hit the broad side of a barn.

But it is definitely food for thought.

Reply to Donald King - Well, no I don't think that the *Fantastic Four* is a sustained narrative, nor do I think most of the rest of the comic books and strips you mention are. The distinction I would draw is between Ronald McDonald and Oliver Twist. At the one extreme you have the iconic, unchanging image in service to the needs of the corporation. However long Ronald has been around, he is the same character composed of a fixed number of physical traits and a specific kind of voice. You could arbitrarily set his age at 24 and say, forty years later on, he's still going to be 24. To me that puts him outside the boundaries of narrative and into the category of an iconic corporate image. Oliver Twist, on the other hand, is born and ages within the confines of Dickens' narrative. Hal Foster expressed regret late in his career that he hadn't moved things along as he had intended to with *Prince Valiant* and to have Prince Arn become the new Valiant while his father aged and moved away from center stage in the strip. I would see that regret as being focused on the same distinction I'm drawing here between an iconic corporate image and a literary figure. Foster's desire as a writer to achieve literary credibility and his gut instinct, I imagine, told him that a more naturally progressive timeline over the thirty-four years that he worked on the strip would put *Prince Valiant* over closer to *Oliver Twist* in literary terms. By procrastinating on the point, the strip remained closer to Ronald McDonald. By sustained narrative I mean a story, a narrative which moves the characters within the narrative through a timeline from birth to death or at least from youth to adolescence. Interestingly, Foster achieved this with Prince Arn, but not with Val himself. Arn aged but Val didn't. You could argue the case with the *Fantastic Four* up until about issue 60 or so and then after that it became obvious that, like Superman and Batman they were always going to be roughly the same age that they were in 1961. *Gasoline Alley* is much closer to *Oliver Twist* than anything else on your list. All the others, to me, are in "McDonaldland".

The adherence to a plausible timeline within the confines of a story, to me, is a key distinction when it comes to the definition of a "sustained narrative". And that's very different from telling 1500 different stories about a 29-year old Superman.

Thou Good and Faithful Cerebite

Apart from just being really funny, Bryan's comic strip illustrates exactly the greatest strength (and cultural value) of cartooning—the ability of cartooning to distil a number of different and complicated ideas into a small space and thus to emphasize those ideas in a way that discussing them in a letter or an essay is less likely to do. Are Dave Sim's YHWH theories fascinating or nutty? Did Dave Sim *actually* stop being an atheist or is he just pulling our collective legs again? And is he just pulling our collective legs in an *innocent* way or does he secretly intend to start his own church? And if he is starting his own church will it actually work? And what if we go out on a limb and start believing in his theories and he starts, you know, laughing at us? And if, having answered all of those questions to your own satisfaction and having come to the conclusion that Dave's YHWH theories are all just one big scam, does that mean it actually is okay to marry women? And the punchline from the guy casting all the doubts is, "No."

It's certainly a handy piece of work for me because it goes a long way towards explaining the reaction to all of my post-1996 work in much the same way that I suspect political cartoons actually help politicians to understand better what the actual reaction to their policies is because the cartoon is going to be far more direct and visceral—and less circumspect and even-handed—than any editorial or news story is going to be. Which stands to reason. By definition the political cartoon has to express a widely accepted and more visceral truth because otherwise it isn't funny.

Looking at what I see as the widely accepted and more visceral truths contained in Bryan's strip it's no wonder I'm driving all of you guys crazy.

I haven't been this satisfied since someone mentioned to me that even though they're pretty sure my YHWH theories are completely unfounded, they have noticed that they never use the term LORD when referring to Jesus or God anymore.

Congratulatons to Bryan Douglas. And thanks.

Another Thing Coming

NEWS & MORE

St. Bonaventure University's Quick Center to Display Cerebus Art

The Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University (New York) has announced an upcoming exhibition of over seventy original pages from the groundbreaking independent comic book series, *Cerebus*. '*Ye Bookes of Cerebus: The Comic Art of Dave Sim and Gerhard*' will open on Friday, September 23, 2005 and will remain on display through January 29, 2006. An artists' talk and reception will be held on Saturday, October 1, 2005 at 1 p.m. At the event, Dave Sim and Gerhard will discuss the *Cerebus* project, the massive 26-year long, 300-issue publishing history of the book, and the religious themes that make up the core of the exhibition.

Over seventy pages will be on display, focusing on many of the religious themes that highlighted the later years of the book and culminating with a dramatic and unique retelling of the Story of Creation.

"The *Cerebus* series is the most stunning achievement in the comics medium, and it is quite a thrill for me as a fan to be able to work with Dave and Gerhard," says curator Jason Trimmer. "It is also gratifying to be mounting a comic art exhibition here, since St. Bonaventure University has a history of interest and support for cartoon and comic book artists," Trimmer continued, noting that the collection of the University includes original drawings by Milt Caniff, the creator of *Steve Canyon*, and Fred McCarthy, creator of the *Brother Juniper* cartoon strip.

This exhibition will feature work from three of the sixteen books that make up the entirety of the *Cerebus* series – *Rick's Story*, *Latter Days*, and *The Last Day*. All of these pages showcase one of the most unique properties of the comic medium, which is its equal emphasis on words *and* pictures working together. As writers and artists began to explore more mature subject matter in comic books, starting in the mid-seventies, they also began to explore the dynamics between how the words and pictures on a page interact and affect the reader. The Sim/ Gerhard pages on display reflect several different approaches they have taken.

Combining stylistic innovation, humor, and insightful religious speculation, '*Ye Bookes of Cerebus: The Comic Art of Dave Sim and Gerhard*' promises to be a unique and thought-provoking experience.

For more information, visit www.sbu.edu, or contact curator Jason Trimmer at (716) 375-7686. Admission to the Quick Center galleries is free and open to the public, Tuesdays through Fridays 10 a.m. to 5p.m., and Saturdays and Sundays from noon until 5 p.m.

This issue's back cover features promotional art for the exhibit.

Winner! Winner!

The first ever *Following Cerebus* contest, announced in our previous issue, asked readers to name the publication in which Cerebus and the Spirit teamed up on the cover. The answer was not the Toronto Comicon program book, reproduced twice in that same issue of *FC* (we wouldn't design a contest *that* easy!), but *The Comics Journal* 98 from way back in 1985. Even Dave had forgotten about this Kevin Nowlan illustration until Craig stumbled across the issue while working on *FC* 4.

Only two *FC* readers managed to track down the *TCJ*. **RANDY ROBICHEAUX** was the first, so he is our winner! And as soon as he gets around to sending us his address (he originally just left a message on our phone), we can send him his prize. (For that matter, we're not even completely sure we have his name spelled right. Randy! Please write!)

No Buffy

Dave's "Favorite Buffy Pic of the Month" got bumped from this issue, as did the letters column, but both will return next time!

THE

QUICK CENTER

at St. Bonaventure University

PRESENTS

YE BOOKES OF CEREBUS

THE COMIC ART of DAVE SIM & GERHARD

SEPTEMBER 23 2005 to **JANUARY 29 2006**